

Kjell Nordstokke

Liberating Diakonia



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ISBN 978-82-519-2795-6

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Grafisk formgivning: 07 Gruppen as
Omslag: Mari Røstvold, Tapir Akademisk Forlag
Papir: Munken Lynx 90 g
Trykk og innbinding: AiT AS edit, Oslo

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E-post: forlag@tapir.no
www.tapirforlag.no

Forlagsredaktør: vebjorn.andreassen@tapir.no

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Introduction

This book aims at strengthening the reflection of diakonia as an integral dimension of being church and a liberating practice in the world. It brings together experiences I have had in my professional life:

- Ten years in Brazil as a parish pastor in Curitiba and later a theological teacher at the *Escola Superior de Teologia* in São Leopoldo;
- Postgraduate student of the Latin American theology of liberation that caused me to write a doctoral dissertation on the ecclesiology of Brazilian, Leonardo Boff;
- Director of the Department of Mission and Development (DMD) of the *Lutheran World Federation* with its head office in Geneva, Switzerland, but in active communication with its 140 member churches all around the world;
- Employee at *Diakonhjemmet*, Oslo, holding different leadership positions and now since 2009 professor of diakonia at its University College.

In all these capacities I have been given opportunities to meet with people deeply involved in diaconal work. These opportunities have opened discussions and new insights that I have tried to reflect on theoretically when presenting papers at consultations and conferences. Most of the chapters of this book were originally presented in this way, very much conditioned by the occasion and its themes. Here, they have been slightly revised, not so much that their original flavor is lost, but hopefully enough to give meaning to new readers.

I have grouped them in three sections. The first deals with the *Theology of Diakonia*. The main focus here is how to formulate theoretical reflection on diakonia. In my view, this requires an interdisciplinary approach bringing together theological reflection and insight from the social sciences.

Chapter 1 presents the *Biblical and Theological Foundation of Diakonia*. It is largely based on a paper presented at the annual meeting of the Lutheran Communion in Southern Africa (LUCSA) in Johannesburg, South Africa June 2006. Elements from a lecture given on the occasion Anders Wejryd being installed as Archbishop in Uppsala in September that year have been integrated into the chapter.

Although biblical and systematic theological material clearly points in direction of a theology of diakonia, it is also clear that such an endeavor presupposes clarity regarding hermeneutical principles and tools. *Chapter 2* introduces a *Theoretical Framework of the Science of Diakonia* proposing an approach that holds together of a praxiological and a epistemological axis, following to a large extent the epistemological model used by the Latin American theologians. This chapter is based on a lecture held at the International Congress in Deacony, Lahti, Finland, in September 1998 that later was printed in the report from this conference (Ryökäs & Kießling 1999:33–46), and in *Svensk Kyrkotidning* 50/1998, 650–655. It is followed up by *Chapter 3*, titled *Diakonia – Theory and Praxis* and is written in cooperation with Australian scholar John N. Collins as an outcome of presentations and dialogue at the annual conference for Swedish diocesan deacons in Sigtuna, Sweden, January 2000. The article was first published in *Svensk Kyrkotidning* 11/2000, 107–111, and is slightly revised here by both authors.

In the two next chapters, this hermeneutical method is applied when dealing with burning diaconal challenges. *Chapter 4: Prophetic Diakonia* is based on a paper originally presented at the LWF Consultation on Prophetic Diakonia in Johannesburg, South Africa, November 2002; *Chapter 5: Liberating Diakonia in the Context of New Poverty* is based on a lecture held at an international Conference for the Study and Development of Diakonia, in Järvenpää, Finland, September 2006. In both, the connection between diaconal identity and diaconal action is focused as reflection on praxis, but also as praxis that urges renewed reflection.

The second section has *The Diaconal Ministry* as theme. *Chapter 6: The Deacon in the New Testament* gives an introduction to how the diak- words are used in the Greek New Testament, and what knowledge is at hand regarding the understanding and role of this ministry in the early church. This text was published earlier in Norwegian (Dietrich, Korslien & Nordstokke 2011:53–64).

Biblical material shows that there is no direct link between deacons in the early church and deacons today. The ministry of deacon must therefore be explained and defended along arguments other than quick references to the Scripture. *Chapter 7: The Diaconate: Ministry of Prophecy and Transformation* links the diaconate to ecclesiological principles of being an inclusive community, and of establishing prophetic practices of transformation. It was written as a contribution to the *Anglo-Nordic Diaconal Research Project* (ANDREP) and was published in Borgegård, Fanuelsen & Hall 2000:107–130.

Chapter 8: Theology from the South: Impulses for Diakonia and the Education of Deacons follows this same track, but now with even stronger links to the Latin American theology of liberation and its perspective on ecclesiology from the perspective of the poor and marginalized. It is a revised version of a paper presented at a European conference for leaders of institutions for training of deacons (*Fachtage der Ausbildungsleiter und Verantwortlichen für Ausbildung zum Diakon in Europa*) in Rome, September 1992.

The third and last section, *Diakonia as Integral Part of Mission*, contains four chapters that all originated from my involvement in the Lutheran World Federa-

tion, while wrestling with the concept of holistic mission. My first input in this process was given at the LWF Consultation on Churches in Mission, in Nairobi, Kenya in 1998 where presented a paper titled *Mission as Diakonia*, here reproduced as *Chapter 9*. This consultation paved the way for the elaboration of the new LWF mission document, *Mission in Context*, which defined mission to encompass proclamation, service (diakonia) and advocacy. When I started as director of the LWF's Department for Mission and Development in April 2005, one of my first tasks was to present this document and promote its use among the member churches. *Chapter 10: The Missional Church – Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment*, is the one presented at the *European Church Leadership Consultation* at Reykholt, Iceland, in June 2005.

Chapter 11: Contemporary Challenges of Church Leadership was delivered at the next *European Church Leadership Consultation*, this time in Greifswald, Germany on September 12, 2008. The theme was largely motivated by the *Statement on the Episcopal Ministry within the Apostolicity of the Church* that had been adopted by the LWF Council the previous year. But it was also motivated by the concern that a strengthened episcopate in the church may result in more hierarchical patterns of exercising power.

Chapter 12: The Ecclesiological Self-Understanding of the Lutheran World Federation: From «Free Association» to «Communion of Churches» is a condensed version of a lecture held on the occasion of the public defense for the degree of doctor of theology at the University of Oslo, 8 February 1991. Its original Norwegian version (Den kirkelige selvforståelse i Det lutherske verdensforbund. Fra «free association» til «communion of churches») was published in *Norsk Tidsskrift for Misjon* 2/1991, 97–112. This condensed version has also been published in *The Ecumenical Review*, Volume 44, Issue 4, October 1992, 479–490.

This last chapter describes how the concept of communion has grown to be the backbone in how the LWF sees itself as an organic body and what it aims at in its holistic mission. During my time in Geneva (2005–2009) we frequently came back to this vision, of envisaging communion as gift and task. In my responsibility for the DMD Program on Diakonia that intended to elaborate a comprehensive and sustained understanding of diakonia as faith-based action of the church, it became fundamental. Especially when observing the commitment of some small member churches in the global South, the importance of being connected to each other as a worldwide communion of churches became evident. The production of the LWF Handbook on Diakonia, *Diakonia in Context*, seeks to testify to this rich variety of diaconal resources and commitment, and to the imperative of mutual accompaniment and accountability.

This book does not aim at giving a strict definition of diakonia. In general, I subscribe to the definition given in the Church of Norway's Plan for Diakonia: «Diakonia is the caring ministry of the Church. It is the Gospel in action and is expressed through loving your neighbor, creating inclusive communities, caring for creation and struggling for justice.» This stated, is must also be remembered that diakonia, according to its nature in the first place, is action. Should diakonia

be limited to theoretical considerations or declarations, it is barely more than «a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.» But good diaconal action requires critical questions and constructive reflection, and it my hope that the following text may contribute to that purpose.

A final word: It is with deep gratitude that I am given the possibility to present this small book on the occasion of my 65th birthday. I feel very much indebted to Diakonhjemmet Foundation and Diakonhjemmet University College for supporting this project and to my colleagues for encouraging me to realize it. A special word of thanks to Professor Jan-Olav Henriksen, The Norwegian Lutheran School of Theology, for constructive comments and suggestions; and to my former LWF colleague, Kathy Magnus, who carefully controlled my English and has given the book its smooth finish from her computer in Minnesota. Last, but not least, thanks to Kazumi who faithfully has been my journey companion, not only during the time of compiling this book, but before that through all the stages of events and experienced to which it refers.

Oslo, April 2011
Kjell Nordstokke

PART I:
THE THEOLOGY OF DIAKONIA

CHAPTER 1

DIAKONIA AS A THEOLOGICAL IMPERATIVE – A LUTHERAN PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

The Letter from the Global Consultation «Prophetic Diakonia: For the Healing of the World,» held here in Johannesburg in November 2002, states:

Diakonia is central to what it means to be the church. As a core component of the gospel, diakonia is not an option but an essential part of discipleship. Diakonia reaches out to all persons, who are created in God's image. While diakonia begins as unconditional service to the neighbour in need, it leads inevitably to social change that restores, reforms and transforms (LWF 2003b:6).

This statement is filled with theological assumptions that need to be appropriated in our context as Lutheran communion. First, how does Lutheran ecclesiology relate to diakonia as an intrinsic part of being church if we confess that the true proclamation of the Word and the correct administration of the sacraments constitute the *vere esse* of the church? Can diakonia then be said to belong to what constitutes the church, or would it be more correct to consider diakonia as something secondary, as an important consequence of what the church is, or as one of the many tasks the church may take upon her?

Secondly, if diakonia is an essential part of discipleship, how should this be seen in relation to the Lutheran teaching that human beings are not saved by their works, but by faith alone? Could such a focus on service disturb the fundamental article of faith that God justifies the sinner by grace and not due to his or her merits, and that we reject all theology that gives human action a synergetic role in salvation?

And finally, if diakonia envisages transformation of society, how is this to be understood within the framework of the Lutheran teaching on the two kingdoms, of distinguishing the spiritual from the worldly? Will we then fall back into the enthusiasm of the spiritualist who expected the Kingdom of God realised in their own time, as a result of Christian action on the political arena, a position that Luther vehemently rejected? Or will we have a form of secular ecclesiology where the Church's primary task is to contribute to a just and sustainable society?

Put in other words: From a Lutheran perspective diakonia - as understood in the letter quoted above - raises both ecclesiological, soteriological, and ethical questions. It also brings forth important questions regarding the formation of structures and leadership of the church, as for instance the understanding of the ministry, and of the deacon as integral part of the church's ordained ministry. Again I quote the Johannesburg letter:

In order to be effective and credible agents of prophetic diakonia, all levels of the church regularly need to assess internal structures and governance models for the sake of transparency and accountability. Member churches and their diaconal ministries should structure diakonia so that it is effective, visible and credible. (...) Leadership at all levels is essential – leaders who equip all Christians to take up their call to serve. (...) Churches should initiate and strengthen education for diakonia. As a ministry, it should be fully integrated into the church's ordained, consecrated and commissioned ministries, as a reflection of the fundamental significance of diakonia for the being of the church (LWF 2003b:8).

In this paper I shall try to give some answers to these questions. From a Lutheran perspective I intend to:

- 1 present the concept of diakonia in a way that proves that it is a biblically founded and meaningful platform for theological reflection;
- 2 to promote a holistic approach to diakonia as essential to the mission of the Church and as an integral dimension of the nature of the Church;
- 3 to provide impulses for the development of a diaconal church in the context of today's society.

These three points remind us that diakonia has to do with the understanding of what the church is and what kind of mandate the Lord has given the church. In other words, that we are dealing here with the question of the church's identity and mission.

On the other hand, we are reminded that diaconal praxis always takes place in real life, where people suffer, experience poverty, violence and injustice, or whatever might threaten their dignity as human beings. In this way, diakonia always reflects the real status of the world, and is challenged by developments in society that exclude the poor and those that are considered expendable. In order to respond to the challenges from today's society, it is necessary to have a solid understanding of actual trends, especially how postmodernism and neoliberal ideologies seem to change our societies.

It is important to see that these two issues, the diaconal nature of the church and the challenges from the world to diaconal praxis, are interrelated. The basic assumption here is the missional understanding of the Church. Being Church means to be sent into the world, following the example of Jesus Christ, who «went everywhere, doing good and healing all who were under the power of the Devil, for God was with him» (Acts 10:38). What does this mean for Christian presence in today's «everywhere»?

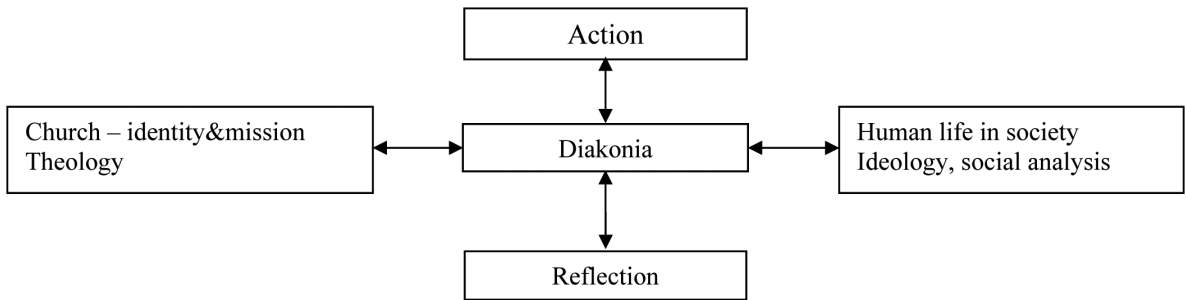


Figure 1: Diakonia in its four basic relations.

Different approaches for understanding diakonia

Different approaches may be followed when developing a theology of diakonia. Since diaconal action always implies concretely responding to situations of suffering, need and injustice, such challenges should be analyzed and reflected critically. Throughout church history, this has happened time and again when Christians have been mobilized to take new and courageous action. Prophetic figures such as Francis of Assisi and Bartolomé de las Casas have inspired generations of Christians; the first because of his radical solidarity with the outcasts of his time, the second because of his bold defense of the indigenous people in the Americas. Fliedner and Wichern founded their institutions in response to what they had learned about the inhumane conditions female prisoners and homeless children were subjected to (Beyreuther 1962:59–125). The Lutheran World Federation was founded in Lund, Sweden in 1947, in the aftermath of World War II and in face of the tremendous challenges posed by the millions of displaced people in Europe. The Federation's primary task was to respond to that challenge by taking responsibility for alleviating human suffering in war-torn Europe. This action was a clear witness to the fact that churches, previously divided by deep political and ideological differences, could work together in order to contribute to reconciliation and healing.

Many other examples can be cited of how specific needs and situations changed the church and its diakonia. Clearly, the church must always be sensitive to human reality, to what people experience and especially to what threatens human life and dignity. Jesus told his disciples to be sensitive and to react to human need. In the story of the feeding of the multitude we see how the disciples

sensed that the people were getting hungry, but only reacted once Jesus told them to, «[...] you give them something to eat» (Matthew 14:16).

This is indicative of what we could call «spontaneous» diakonia. The story of the Good Samaritan shows us the case of «a man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead» (Luke 10:30). This story presents a challenge to all who happened to walk along that same road. As Luther says, there is no need for a Christian to invent good work; it comes to us in the form of everyday challenges.

Such challenges sometimes necessitate that diaconal action is organized, even institutionalized, in the form of hospitals, orphanages, homes for the homeless, aid programs for refugees, development programs, or projects for people living with AIDS, etc.

The theology of diakonia cannot ignore the challenges arising from suffering, need and injustice. That would mean to ignore the sensitivity Jesus emphasized in his diaconal ministry. Therefore, the church must critically ask whether its diaconal practice is sufficiently sensitive to the clamor of the suffering, bold enough to respond to difficult and even controversial challenges, and willing to be renewed through its actions.

Although this «contextual» approach or track is important in view of elaborating a theology of diakonia, it is not sustainable if it stands alone because it could give the impression that diakonia is exclusively formed by challenges arising from the social environment. Of course, this is not the case. What brings diakonia into being, motivates and sustains it, comes from the same sources that give life to the church, namely Word and sacraments. Those same sources point to Jesus' diakonia. As I shall elaborate on later, Jesus' diakonia was deeply rooted in the mission bestowed upon him by the heavenly Father, while being shaped by his sensitivity to human need and suffering.

Therefore the theology of diakonia needs at least two other tracks. Of fundamental importance is one that I shall simply call the «ecclesiological» track. This reflects diakonia as an integral dimension of being church. It will take us to the biblical material, especially the New Testament, and its use and understanding of the concept of diakonia.

The third track, which I shall refer to as the «praxeological» track has its point of departure in the concrete praxis of diakonia. The theology of diakonia must critically reflect the diaconal praxis in which the church is already involved and set priorities for the use of its limited resources. It is only then that the theology of diakonia becomes practicable in the sense of meaningful action, of strengthening vision and commitment, of empowerment and mobilization.

I am convinced that all three tracks must be followed when developing a theology of diakonia. They form a triangle in the sense that they are all necessary parts of an integral, dynamic model. If the ecclesiological dimension is left out, diaconal action runs the risk of becoming situational. This, in turn, could lead to understanding diakonia as being optional, depending on the social challenges

confronting the church. If the contextual track is omitted, diakonia might become an introvert ecclesial activity, at a distance from human reality. Without the third, the praxeological dimension, diakonia might remain mere rhetoric or unrealistic idealism, because it would not be rooted in the everyday life of the church and the congregations.

Connecting the three tracks is not an easy task. It implies bringing together knowledge from theology and the social sciences and opening up a dialogue between theory and praxis.

In light of today's challenges, diakonia will have to address such questions as: How does diakonia deal with new and growing mechanisms of social exclusion? How does diakonia deal with the growing gap between the rich and the poor? How can diakonia witness to the biblical concepts of justice and equality? How can diakonia defend human dignity in actions of solidarity, advocacy and practical accompaniment? These questions lead to further questions: How is diakonia empowered to perform such tasks? By what authority can diaconal action denounce injustice and announce transformation?

There are different approaches to a theological reflection on diakonia, all of them well known within Lutheranism.

The first approach has been along the line of individual piety. That has mostly been the case within the diaconal movement that started in Germany in the 1830s and had Fliehn and Wichern as the most important leaders. They were both strongly influenced by pietism and its emphasis on Christian life as discipleship. Here, diakonia first of all became humble service, connected to charity work in favour of the sick and poor. The diaconal action was understood in the conflict between good and evil, between grace and sin. In the big struggle, the diaconal worker sought to save miserable and fallen people to a new life in God.

The model for the diaconal work within this tradition was of course Jesus, he who had humbled himself and given his life for the salvation of others. Deacons and deaconesses were called to follow him. Their vocation was to devote their life to the service of others.

The diaconal movement inspired people to establish institutions of different kinds. Especially in Germany, but also in the Nordic countries, the fellowships of deaconesses (and their *Mutterhaus*-tradition) and deacons were pioneers in the development of modern health work and social care. Even today the organization of diaconal institutions in Germany (Diakonisches Werk) plays a major role in the country's welfare system, with 30.000 institutions and employing 500.000 persons.

According to this tradition, diakonia is in the first place what deacons and deaconesses do, and institutions are called diaconal because they originally were spaces for their professional action. The risk of this tradition is that without such persons and such institutions, there is no more reason for using the concept of diakonia. It will easily be considered to be an activity of the past, and very much rooted in the experiences of some churches in Northern Europe.

The individualistic and institutional characteristic of this approach has also often led to the understanding of diakonia as being something living separately

from the congregations and the official church, even if this was not the intention. It must also be observed that the emphasis given to individual vocation in «following Jesus» for a long time motivated women especially to opt for lifelong service. But after the Second World War, the number of vocations has decreased dramatically, probably as a consequence of new roles for women in church and society.

A second approach to the understanding of diakonia has been related to the understanding of the church's ministry. The ecumenical movement specifically, has promoted a reflection whether the old tradition of a threefold ministry should be renewed in our time, both for the sake of the ministry and for the ecumenical witness of the church. In 1982 the BEM-document (after its title: *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*) was published by the Commission of Faith and Order, of the World Council of Churches. Here the churches were invited to look for new possibilities and gains in opening for the diaconate as a part of the church's ministry. In this approach, the relation to diakonia as social praxis in the church is not very clear.¹ This is due to the fact that in some churches the deacon mostly has liturgical tasks and the diaconate is the first step in the hierarchical career. Thus, in the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches, the rule says that you have to serve as a deacon at least for half a year before you can be ordained as a priest.

We clearly see that there are significant differences between these two approaches. The first is most of all concerned with Christian life as service to the unfortunate in society, and represents a combination of pietistic spirituality and social engagement. The second is more concerned with the understanding of the ministry; and as such it is related to a more liturgical spirituality and ecumenical engagement.

The third approach is based on a broad reflection on the meaning of being church. The approach, which has become the most common in today's ecumenical setting, and within the World Council of Churches is simply called «ecumenical diakonia.» In 1986 the WCC organised an international consultation on diakonia in Larnaca, Cyprus. Here, diakonia was defined as active expression of Christian witness in response to the needs and challenges of the community in which Christians and the churches live. «We believe that diakonia – in all its many authentic forms – cannot be separated from the struggle for justice and peace» (Poser 1987:122).

1 The BEM document describes the traditional role and tasks of deacons in the church, but misses the opportunity to argue for an ecclesiological foundation for diakonia as integral dimension of being church. «Deacons represent to the Church its calling as servant in the world. By struggling in Christ's name with the myriad needs of societies and persons, deacons exemplify the interdependence of worship and service in the Church's life. They exercise responsibility in the worship of the congregation: for example by reading the scriptures, preaching and leading the people in prayer. They help in the teaching of the congregation. They exercise a ministry of love within the community. They fulfil certain administrative tasks and may be elected to responsibilities for governance.» (WCC 1982:§31)

What are the reasons for reintroducing diakonia as a key ecumenical concept? I shall only indicate what I consider to be the most important factors:

- The need of relating social work / action to the identity of church (we do what we are);
- The search for a holistic perspective in the mission of the church;
- The context of globalization;
- The rediscovery of diakonia as empowered service; and
- The prophetic dimension of diakonia.

Because the concept of diakonia is embedded in the Church's identity and faith it clearly differs from development work, social work or whatever concept that has been used in order to name the Church's action in favour of those who suffer. Thus, diakonia seems to offer a different sort of rationale than the one given by modernist/Western ideology. While the last, by its nature is secular and has little understanding of the role of the church, diakonia tries to develop an interdisciplinary discourse, taking into consideration both secular and theological language. Its rationale thus reflects both «what it is to be a church,» and «what it means to be in the world». It would, however, be wrong to affirm that such rationale is harmonious. On the contrary, it contains contradictions and is fragmented. But does it not, nevertheless, reflect the Christian perspective of seeing perfection hidden in the imperfect?

The diakonia of Jesus

Several New Testament texts point in direction of a theology of diakonia. In some very central passages in the Gospels, Jesus talks about his mission to the world as *diakonia*. In Mark 10 there is a dramatic description of how Jesus struggles with his disciples in order to make them able to see what his mission is all about as they are walking in the direction of Jerusalem. The disciples are concerned with positions and power for themselves. Jesus however, puts their way of thinking upside down and concludes: «For even the Son of Man did not come to be served («deaconed»); he came to serve (to «deacon») and to give his life to redeem many people» (Mark 10:45).

Here we observe a very close interpretation of the messianic role of the Son of Man, the one promised by the prophets, by reference to diakonia. The gospels let us know that the disciples had come to see who Jesus really was. Peter openly confessed his faith in him as «Messiah, the Son of the living God» (Matthew 16:16). But they had not yet seen the new and profound meaning that Jesus gave to his mission as God's Messiah, namely that of serving and of giving his life «to redeem many people.»

The disciples thought that the Messiah would bring an authority that meant ruling over others in a way that would expel the Romans and the ungodly from the territory of the Jews. But Jesus rejects the way of ruling that is known in the world; «You know that those who are considered rulers of the heathen have power over

them, and the leaders have complete authority. This, however, is not the way it is among you. If one of you wants to be great, he must be the servant of the rest, and if one of you wants to be the first, he must be the slave of all» (Mark 10:42–44).

What does this teach us about the nature of diakonia? The answer is given in the following verse - through serving, many people are redeemed! The messianic mission does not aim at the salvation of some few and righteous. «The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost» (Luke 19:10); «... your Father in heaven does not want any of these little ones to be lost» (Matthew 18:14). Jesus represents a different expression of power. It is power to serve and to save, and it is experienced as power from below, empowering the powerless.

The Early Church interpreted the mission of Jesus as incarnation, as divine presence among humans in their everyday reality. Let us briefly point out some basic perspectives related to the incarnate Jesus as presented in the New Testament:

- He is real present in human life, sharing the basic conditions of ordinary people's lives;
- In order to get close to people, he is actively present, moving around, observing and sensing the reality in which people live;
- It is a prophetic presence. Jesus denounces injustice and systems of exclusion;
- Through his presence, the Kingdom of God and its dynamics are present;
- His presence brings healing, transformation, salvation. He brings life's victory over death.

Many stories in the New Testament illustrate this in the way he related to poor and sick, by defending and healing those in need. Notice how he answered John the Baptist who was suffering in prison and sent some of his disciples to Jesus to ask, «Are you the one?» Jesus sent them back with the following message, «Tell John what you are hearing and seeing: the blind can see, the lame can walk; those who suffer from dreaded skin-diseases are made clean, the deaf hear, the dead are brought back to life, and the Good News is preached to the poor» (Matthew 11:4–5). Through his diakonia the Messianic mission is fulfilled, salvation is at hand as God's gracious gift of liberation, from the powers of evil and sin to a new life in Christ.

So here, three terms must be seen together in order to understand the mission of Jesus Christ: incarnation – diakonia – salvation.

By the way of diaconal incarnation, God's concern and good will for his creation, as revealed in the Old Testament, is affirmed. Salvation points at the aim of the mission, that sinners shall not be lost, but be brought to life, reborn as children of God. By the way of diakonia, salvation is at hand for sinners and downtrodden. The Divine Servant, who gave his own life so that the lost might be redeemed and be brought from darkness to light, carried the costs of this mission.

We also observe that this diaconal mission manifests divine authority. This authority questioned the religious and political authorities of his time; therefore Jesus was persecuted, tortured and killed. In this critical moment he was rejected by the people, his disciples fled, and as he was crucified he even experienced aban-

donment by his heavenly Father. So the diakonia of Jesus brought him to the depths of human suffering. But God was with him throughout his mission, he raised him from death – «he is the one whom God has appointed judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets spoke about him, saying that all who believe in him will have their sins forgiven through the power of his name» (Peter in Acts 10:38–43).

From one point of view, the diakonia of Jesus implied humble self-denial and «walking the path of obedience all the way to death» (Philippians 2:8). But from another point of view it also implied the exercise of diaconal authority (*exousia*). This is an authority that is different than the one used by the rulers of the world. They rule **over**. That means that their authority is used to put people down, to silence them, or even to threaten them. The diaconal authority is always **for** people. It is authority to lift up who has been beaten down, to heal and to include, and to empower the powerless being transformed to be co-workers in the vineyard of the Lord.

We remember what Jesus said to his disciples when he commented on the use of power among the rulers of the world. «This however, is not the way it is among you» (Mark 10:43). This means that the teaching of Jesus on this matter refers both to his mission and to the mission that his disciples are given. In other words, diakonia includes both a christological and an ecclesiological dimension. The same point is made very clear in John 20:21 where Jesus meets his disciples after the resurrection, and he says: «As the Father sent me, so I send you.» There is continuity between the mission of Jesus and the mission of his disciples. This continuity is to be found in the diaconal nature of the mission. It should also be noted that Jesus, after giving this mandate to his followers breathed on them and said, «Receive the Holy Spirit». Thus the pneumatological dimension of diakonia is clear. It is God's Spirit of Life that empowers the church to be incarnate in the world and fulfil the mandate given to her.

The diaconal Church

This understanding of the diakonia of Jesus provides the theological foundation for saying that the church by its nature and mandate is diaconal. It is, however, important to see that in this continuity between Christology and ecclesiology, there is also a discontinuity. The diakonia of Jesus is unique in the way that only he was born without sin and the only one able to fulfil the Messianic mission given by the Father. Only his death is a death of redemption.

The relationship between continuity and discontinuity is demonstrated in the story in John 13 when Jesus washes his disciples' feet. Here, Peter first resists, and then is helped to see the diaconal dimension of his master's mission. «If I do not wash your feet, you will no longer be my disciple» (John 13:8). What is at stake here is the very life of the redeemed, and the acceptance of Messiah in the role of one who serves. Later, when Jesus had finished this act of washing, he says, «I have

set an example for you, so that you will do just what I have just done for you» (John 13:15). What Jesus has done, constitutes diakonia. His disciples are called to live according to the new life they are given. The apostle Paul describes what he calls «the diakonia of reconciliation.» «All this is done by God, who through Christ changed us from enemies into his friends and gave us the task of making others his friends also» (2 Corinthians 5:18).

If this is correctly understood, it follows that diakonia is an integral part of the church's identity and life. Diakonia cannot be reduced to be an activity by certain committed persons or made necessary by special social conditions. Diakonia is deeply related to what the church celebrates in its liturgy and announces in its preaching. In the same way, liturgy and proclamation relate to diakonia.

On this basis, it becomes imperative for the Christian community to give continuity to Jesus' diakonia, to its values and qualities. Thus, diakonia became a fundamental concept in the life of the Christian congregations that came into existence all over the Roman Empire. Diakonia also became the term designating leadership positions in the church (e.g., Romans 11:13; 2 Corinthians 4:1; Colossians 4:17). In the Latin translation of the Vulgata, diakonia became «ministerium.» This paved the way for a shift of emphasis towards proclamation and administration of sacraments at the expense of diakonia, and thus limiting the richness of what ministry is about in the life of the church.

Although terminology is important, what is decisive is practicing a diaconal lifestyle. The story about the installation of the seven new leaders in the congregation in Jerusalem in Acts 6 shows how the marginalization of the Greek widows challenged the church's inclusive nature. It was not only the dignity of those ignored in the daily diakonia that was at risk, but the diaconal quality of the fellowship. To ignore this would be to ignore the power of sin and its potential to destroy what God has reconciled in Christ. The installation of the seven, all of whom had Greek names and therefore probably represented the widows' cultural and social environment, was not merely a practical matter in order to have things done better. It was an act of securing the fundamental self-understanding of the church, for the well-being of the whole fellowship and for public witness. The story concludes: «The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem ...» (Acts 6:7).

Diakonia is thus related to the congregation's ethos and structures. In other words, it is both an expression of what the church is by its very nature, and what is manifested in its daily life, plans and projects. It is therefore natural to designate certain concrete action as diakonia. One example we already mentioned is the daily distribution referred to in Acts 6. Another is the collection organized by Paul and his colleagues in favor of the poor congregation in Jerusalem.

This campaign is referred to in several places in the New Testament, and is simply called «the diakonia.» The most extensive commentary is found in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9. The way in which the Apostle Paul admonishes the congregation in Corinth to participate in the campaign is interesting and instructive even today with regard to developing a theology of diakonia.

The first thing to notice is that Paul does not explicitly refer to the poverty affecting the congregation in Jerusalem. It may be that their situation already was well known and that further words were unnecessary. But more probably, this is due to the basic understanding of diakonia, as grounded in theological and ecclesiological principles, and not on changing situations of human need.

For Paul, diakonia is an expression of the koinonia, the new communion of God's people in Jesus Christ. Interestingly enough, Paul even uses the expression the communion of diakonia (κοινωνίαν της διακονίας - 2 Corinthians 8:4). The Christian congregations in Corinth, Macedonia, Jerusalem and elsewhere are united for diakonia and, at same time, united by diakonia, first and foremost by the diakonia of Jesus, «For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich» (2 Corinthians 8:9).

A key word here is grace -χαρις - which, in his commentary on 2 Corinthians, the German scholar Erich Gräßer translates both as «Gnadenwerk» and «Liebeswerk» (work of grace and work of love). This makes clear that grace is more than an attitude. It manifests itself as active intervention, as revealed in the incarnate Jesus and his salvific work (Gräßer 2005:27). The communion is created and sustained by God's χαρις - work of love. To be in Christ implies being in his χαρις - in his work of love.

So Paul admonishes the Corinthians to learn from the example of the Macedonian churches. Thanks to the χαρις of God, poverty and affliction have been transformed into joy and abundance, and this has made them eager to participate in diakonia. The church in Corinth is known to be much more gifted, and should therefore be even more ready to let its faith and knowledge be fulfilled in χαρις - in work of love.

Paul makes it clear that participating in diakonia is a free expression of their χαρις, their action of love, in the spirit of being in communion. This is followed up throughout chapters 8 and 9 in 2 Corinthians. First, Paul relates this to comments on equality as an important dimension of belonging to a communion, in the sense that equality is not only a gift, but also a task advocating a fair balance between: «Your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance» (2 Corinthians 8:14). The practice of diakonia and its ethos of inclusiveness and the mutual sharing of resources thus clearly imply ethical demands, but its basis is the experience of God's grace and the gift of belonging to the communion created by God's grace. The following verse reminds the reader of former times, when the people of Israel received God's manna, the bread from heaven, according to their need. The way it was received affirmed their equality as a communion: «The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little» (2 Corinthians 8:15).

While this may give us the impression that diakonia is something spiritual and remote from everyday life, the last section of 2 Corinthians 8 shows how practical diakonia has to be. Here, Paul raises questions of organization and accountability

in dealing with collected money, thus pointing at the importance of responsibility and of transparency when doing diakonia. But even here we find references to communion. Honesty is a matter of relations, both to God and to fellow human beings, as dishonesty would mean breaking the communion. It is also significant that Titus who is given a key role in organizing diakonia, is presented as *κοινωνός* (2 Corinthians 8:23) which affirms partnership and commitment to the well-being of the communion.

2 Corinthians 9 adds another dimension to the theology of diakonia: Its intimate connection to the church's liturgy. Diakonia grows out of worship and aims toward thanksgiving to God for his indescribable gift (2 Corinthians 9:15). Diakonia is a response to concrete situations of suffering, need and injustice, the fulfillment of the commandment of love, and in all that an expression of what the church believes in and confesses, The grace of God – for the healing of the world.

The secret of diakonia is that its vertical and horizontal dimensions are inseparable. If they are separated, diakonia can easily become secularized. This means that it may still be good and necessary action, but limited to secular interests and goals. Another result of such a separation would be that diakonia becomes spiritualized and too limited by its theological and ecclesial framework.

Rejecting such a dichotomy does not mean uncritically combining the two dimensions. Human dignity is not respected if diaconal action is used as an opportunity to propagate moral or religious teaching. Since the grace of God is a free gift, diaconal action must be generous and unconditional. Only then it reflects God's «indescribable gift» that finally the Apostle lets everything depend on (2 Corinthians 9:15). By this gift, the church is called to diaconal action in the world as a «surpassing» of their thanksgiving to God. The church in Corinth is reminded that by this action and specifically their «generosity of your sharing with them (the congregation in Jerusalem) and with all others» the communion will be strengthened and God will be glorified, not according to secondary intentions related to what they do, but «because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you.» (2 Corinthians 9:13–14).²

Summing up, the Apostle Paul has provided significant elements for establishing a theological platform for the formulation of a theology of diakonia, especially for what I initially referred to as the «ecclesiological» track. It must be admitted that these elements alone do not suffice for elaborating such theology of diakonia. For that purpose a wider perspective is necessary, including a hermeneutical framework that links to central biblical themes. On the one hand, there is the Christological dimension, with its special focus on the holistic nature of Jesus' mission

2 Gräßer also affirms that the collection is «leiturgische Handlung» and not just «profane Dienstleistung,» and continues: «Mit ihrem Dank an Gott anerkennen die Jerusalemer, dass sich eine wirkliche Hilfe und uneigennützigte Brüderlichkeit in dem Kollektenwerk offenbart. Mehr noch! Es drückt sich darin aus (1) Dank für die Einheit der Kirche aus Juden und Heiden und (2) Bestätigung der Legitimität des paulinischen Missionswerkes» (Gräßer 2005:64).

and incarnation as reconciling and liberating practice in the midst of human suffering and injustice, and on the other, the dimension of being in communion, which is intimately related to the first one. Here we clearly see links to the «contextual» and the «praxeological» tracks. They provide decisive criteria dealing with the burning challenges of our time, and for evaluating our understanding and praxis of diakonia in a way that is open for renewal and transformation.

Lutheran perspectives

How is all this to be interpreted within Lutheran theology? In this last section I shall point to some topics where Lutheran teaching may seem to be critical towards, or even contradict, a theology of diakonia as presented above.

Good works

Lutherans have always been suspicious when good works are lifted up as important. It is feared that too much attention on works (or deeds) might undermine the principle of justification by faith alone. We know groups of orthodox Lutherans that criticise not only the traditional heresy of seeing good works as human contribution to salvation (synergy), but also pietism for introducing good works as a necessary consequence of being saved.

It is often ignored that *Confessio Augustana* art. 6 includes the teaching of regarding good work as an intrinsic element of faith:

Likewise, they teach that this faith is bound to yield good fruits and that it ought to do good works commanded by God on account of God's will and not so that we may trust in these works to merit justification before God. For forgiveness of sins and justification are taken hold of by faith, as the saying of Christ also testifies (Luke 17:10): «When you have done all (things) ... say, 'We are worthless slaves.'» The authors of the ancient church teach the same. For Ambrose says: «It is established by God that whoever believes in Christ shall be saved without work, by faith alone, receiving the forgiveness of sins as a gift.»

What is rejected is an understanding of good works as action intended to obtain merit before God (and also human beings). What is defended are good works as a visible expression of the new life in Christ given in faith. Luther more explicitly elaborates on this in his book on Christian freedom, where he states that the Christian is absolutely free in his/her relation to God, and at the same time bound as a slave in the relation to the fellow human being. This is only understandable in ontological terms. It is not due to acts of will that we do good works, but due to our being in Christ. In Christ we participate in His justice and are free to be God's children. In Christ we equally participate in His incarnation for serving and liberating sisters and brothers in need and bondage.³

For Luther, this is deeply connected to his understanding of God's love that is present in the world through Christ. All baptised are in Christ, gifted by the same love, and their actions express God's good will for all creation. Therefore, Christian obedience is in the first place obedience to what we are in Christ, not obedience to moral or pious standards in an effort to become like Jesus. It does not depend on commitment and strong will, but flows out of the new life in Christ and empowering presence of the Holy Spirit.

Ecclesiology

It has been a strong tradition in Lutheran churches to understand the church as an event around the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. This is however, a rather reductionistic reading of CA 7 which clearly states that the church is «the assembly of saints.» The saints are those referred to in CA 4–6, the people justified by faith in Christ and empowered to participate in God's love through service.

After the Formula of Concord (1577) it became correct Lutheran theology to distinguish between what constitutes the church (Word and sacraments) and what are the consequences of being church. Within this logic, diakonia should belong to the latter, as visible sign of the gratitude Christians owe for what they have freely received in Christ. This is also expressed in the distinction between *favor* and *donum*, as two separable acts within the *ordo salutis*. The first act by which we are saved from sin and damnation depends on God's grace, while the second is related to our sanctification which of course cannot depend on good works grounded on human effort, but on God's gift.

Recent research has documented that Luther never undertook this separation but held *favor* and *donum* together. They are two dimensions of God's love revealed in Jesus Christ, and being in Christ implies receiving *favor* and *donum*. The problem is that the forensic understanding of justification by faith has become a dominant position in Lutheran theology, while the ontological, and thereby organic understanding of salvation, has been given less attention.

This has serious consequences for the understanding of the church. The church becomes a place for listening to the Word and receiving the sacraments, and less a place for living together the newness of life in Christ and for being participants in God's mission to the world. Within a forensic tradition of justification, Word and sacraments are vehicles of making visible God's *favor*. But equally

3 Compare the wordings in the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification: «Grace as fellowship of the justified with God in faith, hope, and love is always received from the salvific and creative work of God. But it is nevertheless the responsibility of the justified not to waste this grace but to live in it. The exhortation to do good works is the exhortation to practice the faith...» (LWF/Catholic Church 2007:Annex 2D)

they are vehicles of God's *donum*, in the sense that baptism empowers for discipleship and the Holy Communion transforms for service after the service.

Church and society

Luther and the other reformers reacted very critically to the worldly power of the bishops of their time and advocated separation between spiritual and worldly power. The teaching of the two kingdoms has, as its first and foremost objective, to resist the abuse of both forms of power. This does not imply however, that the two kingdoms should be separated, since they both belong to God and are marked by the presence of his love (although in different manners). Christians belong to both kingdoms, and their service is called for in both.

Diakonia is the visible expression of this service. It should not to be understood as an attempt to Christianise the world, establishing Christian structures and values as normative for all citizens. Nor should it be reduced to mere secular work – for development and welfare. Diakonia is action that expresses God's love and should therefore be generous and unconditional. At the same time, it is realistic taking into consideration the shortcomings of human beings and of societies. Therefore it has to be prophetic, lifting up the dignity of the excluded, denouncing the powers that seek justice and life only for themselves, announcing ways of promoting human values and wellbeing for all.⁴

Conclusion

This article intended to present basic elements when elaborating a theology of diakonia. It has evidenced that task is not easy as the very concept of diakonia is used in different ways in the church and associates to different types of ecclesial praxis. On its own this term has no immediate theological meaning. For that reason theologizing on diakonia requires a precise account for how this is done, especially its epistemology and hermeneutical approaches.

On the other hand, this same concept has proven to be very helpful when reflecting on the church. Its hermeneutical strength lies in its ability to relate the identity of the church to its mission, of integrating different perspectives and connecting to central Christological motifs. This has contributed to a better understanding of the holistic nature of mission, and of renewing the reflection of how to be relevant in the world when responding today's challenges.

4 A further reflection on prophetic diakonia is given in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE SCIENCE OF DIAKONIA

Is it possible to give professional diaconal praxis a theoretical framework in a way that could give diaconal reflection rationality and status as scientific discipline? In this article I shall first discuss some of the theoretical difficulties that seem to obstruct this possibility. In the second part I shall sketch a model for how the science of diakonia may be approached epistemologically.⁵

Why has science apparently shown little interest for diaconal praxis and reflection? Within the study of theology, diakonia as theme may appear as one of many topics within practical theology, but it is seldom regarded as an important one. In the presentation of church history, most emphasis is given to doctrinal matters, to personalities of strong opinions, and less to what Christians have done and organized as diaconal work. In general terms, it can be stated that theology considers diakonia as one possible practical consequence of church based social ministry. Only few would claim that diaconal praxis requires its own epistemological framework.

The reason could also be that it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to develop diakonia as an academic discipline. This relates both to diakonia as praxis and as theoretical reflection on praxis. If the opinion is held that diaconal work in its performance in no way differs from public health or social work, there are in fact no good reasons to give the study of diakonia scientific status on its own. Of course,

5 I use the term *science of diakonia* in order to indicate that *diakonia* both includes a determined praxis, an ideological framework that intends to explain the distinct identity of this praxis, and a disciplined reflection in order to systemize what is being done in a professional way. Another word for *science of diakonia* could be *diaconics*, which reminds the German *Diakonik*. The problem with the latter is that it often has been used as an intrinsic theological term, without any reference to social sciences. It should also be mentioned that I use the term *praxis* for social action that is planned and goal oriented. In this way praxis should not be understood as any kind of *practice*.

historical studies can be done on the origin and development on diaconal institutions but such studies would be descriptive and without reference to distinct normative principles that would differ from those applied to corresponding public institutions.

Similar difficulties exist regarding the theological and ideological framework that normally is used in order to explain the identity of diakonia. Without such a framework, diakonia may be reduced to a tradition of social praxis rooted in the church. That would however, not be sufficient for claiming that diakonia should be regarded as a distinctive area of scientific study. It would be mere tautology, if diakonia is defined by stating what diaconal institutions and deacons happen to do. Again, the lack of normative principles for judging such praxis and for the construction of relevant theories is evident.

The diaconal praxis, as we know it mainly from the context of Protestant churches in Northern Europe, has its historical roots in the revivalist movement in Germany and was strongly influenced by Pietism in the first half of the 19th century. The movement was profoundly marked by personalities such as Fliedner⁶ and Wichern⁷, and diakonia came to be understood as a personal, practical, and above all, a spiritual response to God's vocation to help needy people. Influenced by the religious orders within the Catholic Church, and especially the virtues of simplicity and humble obedience, the growing communities of deaconesses and deacons were marked by a lifestyle that provided identity and strength to deal with very complex social questions. As a consequence, diaconal institutions were founded in surprisingly large numbers during the following hundred years. This was also experienced in the Nordic countries. Diaconal institutions played a central role in the development of professional care and social work. In many ways, the diaconal praxis modeled a pattern for what later would be understood as public responsibility.

To many, this is what diakonia is all about. In our North European context, numerous institutions and activities are rooted in this tradition. Evidently, important changes have taken place. Today there are fewer deaconesses, and the communities of sisters and brothers are of much lesser importance than was the case a hundred years ago. The pietistic tradition is not as influential as before. To many, the most disquieting change however, is related to the fact that the distinctive quality of diaconal institutions is not as obvious as it was in the beginning. It is not easy to discover the difference between a public and a diaconal hospital. Both are funded by the government, the professional work is the same and the staff also appears quite similar.

6 Theodor Fliedner (1800–1864), German pastor in Kaiserswerth (near to Düsseldorf). In 1833 he opened a refuge for discharged female convicts, and in 1836 a hospital and deaconess training center.

7 Johann Hinrich Wichern (1808–1881), pastor in Hamburg and leader of the German Inner Mission. In 1833 he established *das rauhe Haus*, a home and training institution for poor children, later also for training of deacons.

From this background, the question has been raised: What sense does it give to call this specific area of health and social work and their respective institutions *diaconal*? Is it possible to delineate a specific room space for action designated as *diaconal* and to justify this scientifically? Or, could we reformulate the opening question of this chapter: Is it possible to give diaconal praxis a theoretical framework that makes it possible to answer questions related to the *why*, *where* and *how* of diakonia? Can such answers be formulated according to the principles of a scientific discourse? In other words, can a *science of diakonia* be constructed?

These questions are not new. Especially since the modern social welfare state took over tasks that earlier had been the responsibility of diaconal institutions, a crisis of identity arose. Had diakonia now played out their role in society? Or was this a time of renewal and change?

In the effort to argument in favor of a future for diakonia, two main approaches are found: The first, acts within the framework of theological reflection and tries to find grounds for a renewal of diaconal praxis which are mainly oriented by Biblical teaching and the tradition of the early Church. The problem with this approach is that it easily becomes ecclesiocentric and that it contents itself with theological arguments in dealing with the *raison d'être* of diakonia. This has been seen as a withdrawal of diakonia from the public sphere to internal activities of the church. As a consequence, it has become difficult to identify the difference between diaconal praxis and ordinary pastoral work. From this perspective, it seems difficult to consider the theory of diakonia to be much more than practical considerations of organizing church activities.

The second approach is much more oriented by social sciences and by social ethics. The followers of this approach advocate a legitimate space for non-governmental actors within the area of health and social work. They see this as an expression of Christian responsibility for the construction of a human, just, participatory and sustainable society. Diakonia is, within this view, one of many possible examples of concrete Christian response to social challenges.

This position however, leaves a lot of questions unanswered. If society as such, presents the context and condition for Christian service, why should there be diaconal institutions? If creation as a whole is considered the arena for this service, why should diakonia be limited to certain professions within health care and social work? If diakonia is to be understood in the same all-embracing way as ethics, or eventually Christian ethics, how is it possible to construct a scientific discipline of diakonia with a proper area of study that differs from social ethics in its broadest sense? How can we avoid as consequence that diaconal work within this perspective becomes secularized, without any identity of its own due to the characteristics given by institutionalism and professionalism?

Common for both approaches however, is their underlying difficulty in presenting a convincing relationship between church and society. It may be that this difficulty is rooted in the historical praxis of the Lutheran national churches. In the tradition of the Reformation, the Christian nation was given ecclesial authority and responsibility, a position that still is held in the State Church structure in

the Nordic countries. Theologically, this construction is often justified by the dialectic between the visible and the invisible church, which means that the true Church is also found beyond the limits of the organized and visible church. Consequently, Christian life and service should not be restricted to what is registered as part of the local congregation. From this point of view, professional work in a public health institution should be considered true diakonia in the same manner as activities initiated by church officials.

In a context where all citizens were considered Christians and the king was the most prominent member of the church, it made sense to relate diaconal work to political responsibility and public institutions. The diaconal movement of the 19th century can be seen as a tremendous effort to re-Christianize society and give Christian virtues a new role related to practical care for the most needy. Wichern saw inner mission and diaconal work as two dimensions of the same project to save Christian society from decay and subversive ideologies (Wichern 1856).

Today this position is much more complicated, and another relationship between church and society must be worked out. It has become problematic to untie diakonia from the visible church at least for two reasons. The first, is the modern, or even post-modern, nature of society. Not only secularization, but even more religious and ideological pluralism contradicts an understanding of society as Christian or as the carrier of basic ecclesial structures as was the opinion in the 16th century. This must have consequences for the understanding of diakonia.

The second argument is of equal importance. If diaconal praxis is placed in the public sphere, or in diaconal institutions outside the reach of the local congregation, the visible church loses an important dimension of its basic nature. As a consequence a church is developed which is primarily concerned with words and liturgy.

This is probably why significant effort has been given in order to root diaconal praxis in the life and the structure of the visible church. The Church of Finland has had a leading role in this process with its decision that every parish should have a diaconal worker. The so-called Scandinavian model of congregational diakonia that can be found in Finland, Sweden and Norway, has pursued a consequent reshaping of diaconal praxis the last decades. The Church of Norway Plan for Diakonia (1987 and 2007⁸) clearly underpins this new praxis.

The practical framework of this reshaping has primarily set out that the official church now appears as a responsible subject of the diaconal praxis. Deacons are no longer consecrated by the community they entered, but by the bishop, whereby they also are given legal status as workers in the church. Similarly, the arena of diaconal praxis has been shifted from institutions to the local congregation. More attention is given to communitarian activities and proposals instead of the more individual and therapeutic approach developed in the diaconal institutions. This holistic approach has also opened the door for the spiritual dimension

8 <http://www.kirken.no/?event=doLink&famID=271>

in diaconal work, as well as for better cooperation between professionals and volunteers. It has also meant less dependency on public funding and patterns of organization.

With these changes related to praxis and structure, we can also see a corresponding change regarding the theoretical framework. A main argument has been the same as that of the founders of the diaconal movement in the 19th century, namely that the introduction of diaconal work in the congregation with an ordained deacon as its leader, means a restoration of biblical traditions. Accordingly, the church in the New Testament had already instituted a diaconal ministry with special responsibility for charity work. Today's diakonia is considered to be in continuity with this tradition.

New research has, however, demonstrated that this theoretical framework has various weak points.

The first problem to be noted has to do with the fact that the Greek word *diakonia* (and its related words) does not mean «humble service.» It is difficult to find any instance in the New Testament, or in contemporary Greek writing, that relates *diakonia* to charity work. The Australian scholar John N. Collins, has convincingly demonstrated this and also refuted the common position that *diakonia* is used differently in the New Testament than in common Greek, connoting self-effacing service of others (Collins 1990).

Collins is only partly right when he blames this standard interpretation within theology on the article of H.W. Beyer, in Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* where *diakonein* (the verb) is «active Christian love for the neighbor» (Beyer 1935). That interpretation is probably as old as the diaconal movement, and it has had enormous consequences for the development of diaconal work. This interpretation made it easy to see nursing and social work as relevant areas of diaconal praxis. Now we see that this is most likely grounded on a misinterpretation of the Greek terms.

There are very few linguistic indications that *diakonia* can be related to charity work and that the deacon would have any special responsibility within that area. It is also most questionable that *diakonia* should be interpreted as «serving at the table,» an option quite common among more conservative theologians eager to upgrade the liturgical role of the deacon. Collins has convincingly shown that *diakonia* is most commonly used for missions given to persons of confidence, often in the role as an authorized go-between. In New Testament language, *diakonia* frequently implies a task given by God. The agent of this task always acts in a way that includes both word and deed. From this linguistic point of view, it is impossible to conclude that *diakonia* is humble service of the needy, and even less that it should take the concrete form of nursing and social work. Quite different arguments are necessary in order to come to such conclusions.

The same difficulties appear when attempting to justify the work of deacons according to the practice of the ancient church. What deacons were doing then and what deacons are doing today are two different things, related to the different

historical contexts in which the church lived. Therefore, the situation of the past cannot be held as normative for the church today.

It must be concluded then, that this theological framework that has normally been used to give diaconal praxis a theological foundation, is not viable. If this is correct, it becomes problematic that theological concepts are widely used to justify understandings and practices in a manner that cannot be upheld by science. The consequence is a profound and critical questioning, not only of the traditional institutional model of diakonia, but also of the recent attempt to remodel diaconal praxis within the context of the visible church. Can this challenge be met in a way that leads to the construction of another and more consistent theological framework?

In this part I will present some points towards what, in my opinion, may be presented as a theoretical framework for the science of diakonia.

The first point is related to *methodology*. The Latin American theology of liberation has clearly demonstrated the importance of methodology, not only from a practical point of view, but also regarding the perspective that a determined area of study is given. These theologians criticized traditional theology for preferring deductive methods. When reflection is deduced from «timeless» principles or traditional concepts that already have been classified and subdued by «official» theology, it most likely will appear idealistic and rather irrelevant to outsiders.

This is why the theology of liberation has opted for an inductive method, thus opening for a creative, but also critical dialectic between praxis and theory. What does this mean?

First of all it claims that theory must be directed towards praxis and be oriented by questions raised by praxis. According to Gustavo Gutiérrez, the founding father of the Latin American theology of liberation, theory starts as a critical reflection on praxis (Gutiérrez 1974:11f). The praxis that is referred to here is «the praxis of the Christian, of his active presence in history,» (Gutiérrez 1974:7) and it is recognized as *first act*, as a space room worthy of theological reflection. The *second act* contains a critical reflection on this praxis. It must necessarily be critical or it will easily be limited to apologetic affirmations of what always has been done.

How can this methodological approach be utilized for the development of a theoretical framework for diakonia?

There are two points of relevance. The first is of epistemological nature and may be designated as the heuristic principle, stating the simple fact that diaconal praxis exists and may turn out to be an appropriate *first act* for meaningful theological reflection.

But the second point is more important as it relates to what is also substantially held to be an object for theological reflection, namely *Christian presence and praxis* at the point of interaction between Church and society (or «world»).

Following the position of Gustavo Gutiérrez, this reflection must be critical. In order to be critical, reflection needs criteria. Without criteria the critical discourse will become arbitrary and without verifiability. How do we find trustworthy criteria? Again, the methodological option is important. Because praxis comes

before theory, the interdisciplinary nature of praxis must be respected and the identification of criteria must be corresponding.

To give an example: When reflecting theoretically on a specific diaconal praxis such as work among drug addicts, the approach has to be inter-disciplinary due to the complexity of that praxis. It is not possible to limit the criteria for critical reflection to just one discipline such as theology. This indicates that the theoretical framework for the science of diakonia cannot be exclusively theological.

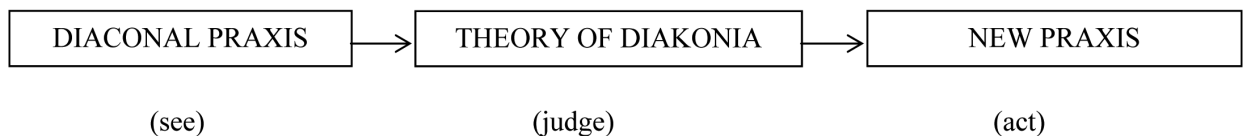
Interdisciplinarity is widely accepted by professionals today, and is often looked upon as a practical way of dealing with complex human suffering across traditional professional lines. But, the claim for interdisciplinary research started as a protest against professional positivism and unilateralism in the late 1960's (Jantch & Bianchetti 1995). A profound skepticism towards power-structures' use of theory is linked to this protest. Through the claiming of theory's close relation to praxis, it was emphasized that any theory is provisional and can never perceive the fullness of reality, nor of human praxis.

If it is admitted that the theoretical framework of the science of diakonia must be interdisciplinary, this position implies several important points. It rejects the hegemony of one theory or one discipline, either theology or social sciences. Instead, it advocates dialectic between different criterion, conditioned by context and consequences. According to this understanding, interdisciplinarity is more than multidisciplinary; it strives to develop an open epistemology where different systems of knowledge may be interrelated through mutual respect for the appropriate authority of each.

The main reason for opting for an interdisciplinary approach is found in the very nature of diakonia, as an intrinsic part of its values and vision.

Having this in mind, two basic axes are necessary for the theoretical framework of diakonia. On the one hand is the axis praxis-theory, which is also known as *the praxiological axis*. On the other hand, is *the epistemological axis*, characterized by interdisciplinary knowledge.

The first axis may be visualized through the well-known method of «see-judge-act.»

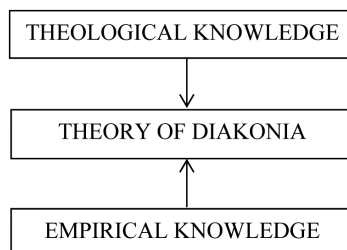


According to this scheme, the first moment of seeing relates to existing praxis. This also implies a moment of silence and listening, permitting the actors within praxis to formulate and conceptualize their experiences. The moment of seeing is hopefully provocative in the literal meaning, in the sense that it calls forward new knowledge and new questions related to what has been seen.

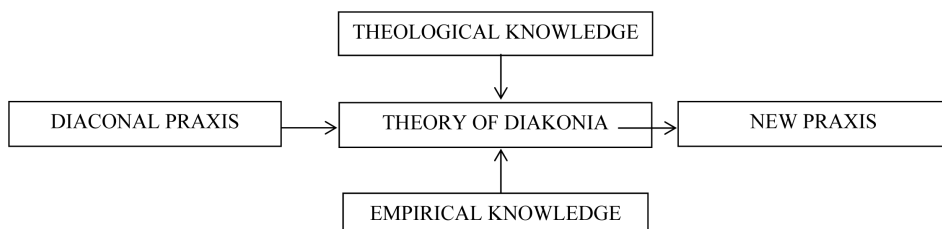
The second moment of judging claims criteria, and constantly renewed reflection on which criteria to use when establishing relevant theories. Due to the fact that praxis relates to a reality that is interdisciplinary, the criteria must be corresponding. Here, prejudice may disturb the process of judging, which happens when clear opinions already are established even before the first moment of seeing. This said, it must of course be admitted that nothing can be seen without reference to earlier reflection and judgment. This shows the truth behind the saying «knowledge is power,» acknowledging how easily theory manages to classify what is seen as something already known.

This is why the third moment of acting is equally important. Its aim is to renew praxis according to what has been seen and judged, by producing new insight and better work methods. In this way, the main concern of the praxiological axis is to relate theory to praxis, thus contributing to the professional quality of diaconal action according to established scientific standards.

It is equally important to develop what can be called the epistemological axis. The purpose of this axis is to establish theoretical reasons for claiming why one specific area of praxis can be related to a determined theory, whether theological, or empirical as part of social sciences. In order to illustrate: Diaconal theory on how to work with immigrants will benefit both from theological reflection on inclusiveness as Christian value and ecclesiological imperative and from insight from empirical sociological studies using quantitative and qualitative research methods. This axis can be seen like this:



What gives the science of diakonia its distinct identity is that the two axes are held together.



The two axes together thus establish an epistemological framework that corresponds to the interaction between praxis and theory. From this perspective, the science of diakonia could be considered a practical science (German: *Handlungswissenschaft*). The first and foremost objective of the science of diakonia is consequently to give well founded answers to question of what is good and relevant diaconal praxis (*ortopraxis*).

The epistemological axis confronts us with two crucial questions. The first is, how to relate the concept *diakonia* to a certain area of praxis now that we know how this term has been misinterpreted in the past? The second is, what makes this specific area of action so interesting that it merits theoretical reflection and eventually status as science?

The first question is the most decisive. It is related to the fundamental question of the church's mandate to respond to human reality - a vulnerable reality marked by injustice and suffering. Is it possible to develop an ecclesiology that involves concrete acts of care and solidarity in a way that has practical consequences for how the church lives and is organized? Could the diaconal ministry and the different forms of diaconal activities be seen as signs of this mandate and as instruments of what the church as a whole is called to be?

To name this dimension of the church's nature *diakonia* may at first glance seem arbitrary, especially considering the misinterpreted use of this concept in the past. But this is not necessarily the case. It is possible to designate the church's mission as a whole to the suffering and conflictive world as *diakonia*, not as humble self-effacing and silent service in the tradition of pietistic lifestyle, but as conscious intervention representing God's active love for creation and his project of salvation as revealed in Jesus Christ.

This understanding corresponds largely to Collins' interpretation of the New Testament. It is through systematic theology and ecclesiological reflection that the concept of diakonia gains relevance. The Bible and the witness of the early church can only give a few and eventually subordinated arguments in this matter.

Collins' observation that diakonia has the mandate of go-between is interesting when diaconal praxis takes place in contexts of conflict and marginalization. Where mechanisms of exclusion silence people and deny their human dignity, diaconal praxis should be the sign and instrument of inclusion. The diakonia of reconciliation of which the apostle Paul speaks (2 Corinthians 5:18) is more than relevant in today's world marked by the effects of market-oriented globalization, fragmentation, individualization and escalating violence.

Central in Collins' presentation is the close relationship between word and deed in diakonia. This questions a long tradition of separating proclamation and service in the church and a long praxis of reticence in diaconal work. It could however, be that the diaconal word has its own way of being articulated, according to the praxis where it is said. Probably it should take the form of both denouncement and announcement. The first form is taken as critical (some would say prophetic) words against injustice and dehumanizing structures and ideas. Too often diakonia has been silent and failed to stand up in defense of victimized people. In our time, the advocacy role of diakonia seems to have become a very important task.

But announcement also belongs to that task. Someone must announce the dignity of the lowly, the religious values of the condemned, and the capacities of the excluded. This announcement is always rooted in the announcement of the Good News, of God's healing power, of God's liberating presence in Jesus, our brother and Saviour, and of the life-giving breath of God's Spirit.

If this mandate of the church can be called *diakonia*, is it then appropriate to link it to what traditionally is designated diaconal work? In my opinion it is, but with some important critical points.

Firstly, the church's diakonia is always more than what is organized as diaconal work. Even if it is possible to identify existing diaconal work as diakonia, God's diaconal action within and outside the church, should not be limited to what is designated as diaconal work. At the same time, this observation makes possible a critical judgment of diaconal installations and activities. Are they diaconal just by name, or do they carry the identity of diakonia?

From another perspective and with reference to what earlier was said about the relation between the visible and the invisible church, diakonia must also be manifest in the visible church. Without such concrete manifestations, diakonia runs the risk of being reduced to ideology or rhetoric.

The field of diaconal praxis is very complex. The task of the science of diakonia is to study this vast tradition and central concern of the church. Certainly this will bring its students to surprising new insight. Just one example at the end of this lengthy wrestling with intricate concepts and considerations:

When Fliedner started his work in Kaiserswerth in the 1830s, he needed money to realize his plans (Gerhardt 1937:310). While travelling around and campaigning for his project, he argued why it was necessary to do something for female prisoners. He found a good argument when reading Acts 20:28, the text where Paul speaks to the elders in Ephesus, «Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.» This way of using the biblical text may indicate that Fliedner had a broader ecclesial concern than often is seen in his pietistic tradition. Perhaps the inclusion of the despised together with recuperation of hurt dignity was as central to his concern as the benevolent and paternalistic charity with which his movement often has been identified.

The purpose of this article has been to point at a possible theoretical framework for the science of diakonia. The praxiological and the epistemological axes are presented as methodological approaches in order to secure a clear focus on praxis when theorizing diakonia, and at the same time to establish a research model that stimulates interdisciplinary reflection. The model itself does not guarantee a balance use of its tools. With the praxiological axis there is always a risk that either theory or praxis becomes too prominent with the consequence that the intended renewal of praxis will not happen. Similarly, also the epistemological axis can become unbalanced. If either theology or social sciences is given a normative position, and either of the two is reduced to a role of just presenting data to the other, the real quality of the theory of diakonia gets lost. The art of theorizing dia-

konian thus proves its quality in bridging different knowledges⁹, including their terminologies, methods, normative principles and findings.

9 «Knowledges» (plural) is not proper English as this word only appears in singular. The Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos has commented on this referring to his mother tongue that allows plural «saberes» (Santos 2007).

CHAPTER 3

DIAKONIA – THEORY AND PRAXIS

Co-author: John N. Collins

The praxis of diakonia

The following considerations about the relationship between theory and praxis in diaconal work are based on observations of praxis at three distinct historical moments. The consideration will lead us to realize how both theory and praxis have changed in accord with changing external circumstances.

The first historical moment chosen is around 1850, the period when the diaconal movement reached the Nordic countries, and several motherhouses were established. The second moment is around 1950, the period when the modern secular state developed its social system according to the Nordic social democratic model. This model had pretensions to reach all kinds of human suffering and to be the solution of all social problems. The third moment is around 2000, our present period of re-orientation for both church and society which has occasioned new styles of diaconal praxis as well as new ways of reflecting on the identity of the deacon.

Before we enter into a description of these three historical moments or stages, it may be useful to remember that theory often has the function of legitimizing an established praxis. When diaconal workers are asked, «Why do you do this?» or «Why is this called diakonia?» it becomes necessary to elaborate a theoretical explanation. This explanation sustains what is done within a framework that is logical and convincing. Theory also has the task of being a critical and constructive partner-in-dialogue with praxis. Its role here is to reconsider, renew or reorient what until now has been considered a convincing way of doing diakonia. It is in this spirit that we offer the following considerations.

We now go back 150 years to look at the kind of praxis that then constituted diakonia and the institutions that spread all over Northern Europe from the 1840's as manifestation of the new diaconal movement pioneered modern health

and social care. Here new professions were modeled. At the same time, the institutions had a clear Christian identity, expressed above all by the lifestyle and value system of the deaconesses. The value system was based on their understanding of diaconal work as unselfish Christian love of the neighbor.

The leaders of the diaconal movement interpreted this work as a re-establishing of what the New Testament teaches on diakonia. This refers not only to diakonia as humble Christian service in the tradition of pietistic spirituality, but also to the 19th century intention to reconstitute the old order of deacons after the manner of the first Christian communities. Acts 6 was read as confirming this understanding of diakonia and of the deacon as the church minister responsible for charity work.

The official 19th century church however, reacted lukewarmly to this idea, and only limited space was given to the deacons and their activities within the church structures. The diaconal institutions therefore, developed as rather independent structures, eventually with more affinity to the health and social services of the government.

The role of the deacon at this stage is clearly that of a servant. It has strong personalist traits, framed within the pietistic tradition of humble service, of responding to the vocation to serve according to the example set by Jesus. The structure of the motherhouse ensured that the characteristic values of this role would be obedience and silent service, above all in contexts of caritative work.

The theology of diakonia

The praxis specific to the period 1850–1950 would hardly have developed so strongly along its particular lines if a particular theory or theology had not gradually developed to support the direction the praxis had taken. The theology established itself in an increasingly academic mode. It had no competitors, and by the 1960s had become a new orthodoxy. As such, it endured well beyond the period when praxis began to modify itself. Even in 1999 two publications significant within the diaconal movement – *Tro & Tanke* (no. 2) of the Church of Sweden and *Diakonia Christi* (no. 3/4) of the Roman Catholic and German-based International Centre for the Diaconate – included studies typical of the 1960s.

The early German pastors of the motherhouse tradition constantly reminded the deaconesses of the origin of their name and calling by drawing upon gospel teachings like the parable of the Judgement of the Nations in Matthew; 25, upon sayings of Jesus such as, «I am among you as one who serves» (Luke 22:27), and upon the story in Acts: 6 of the choosing of seven men to «serve at tables.» These and similar passages in the New Testament provide instances of the Greek diakon-words which also lay behind the title of the deacon (*diakonos*).

In 1931, Wilhelm Brandt, a New Testament scholar but also a pastor at the Bethel motherhouse, published his doctoral thesis *Dienst und Dienen im Neuen Testament*. In this he surveyed attitudes towards service as conveyed by a range of

words within ancient Greek. The general conclusion was that all menial service was considered to be humiliating and unworthy of a free man.

In passing to early Christian writings, Brandt claimed to have discerned that one of the Greek terms conveyed a different attitude to service. This was the diakon- set of terms. Here, Brandt described a particular set of values as highly prized within Christian circles and deriving from the teaching of Jesus and from the attitude which Jesus showed in all his dealings with people, especially with people in need. The values arise because of specific linguistic and semantic characteristics which Brandt attributed to the diakon- words in early Christian writings.

These characteristic values can be summarized along the following line of interpretation:

- A. Ordinary everyday word;
- B. Not religious;
- C. Basically means service at table;
- D. A word from terminology for slaves;
- E. Underwent a change of meaning in Christian circles;
- F. Represented lowly service of love like that of Jesus.

On the basis of the linguistic evaluations which these headings represent, the term diakonia quickly came to represent a kind of service which was understood as exclusive to Christian usage. Its exclusively Christian character was said to derive from values espoused and demonstrated by Jesus himself.

As soon as Brandt's study was published, H.W. Beyer picked it up as the basis of the linguistic analysis of the diakon- words which he contributed to the most influential work of Christian lexicography ever published. This was Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. The volume which included Beyer's study was published in 1935 (English 1965). With the academic authority which this dictionary gave to these linguistic views, diakonia entered professional theology and, in particular, the whole field of the theology of the ministry and ordination within the church.

Deacons were now assured that there was a firm academic base for the theology of their own place in Christian ministry – even if most of them did not yet receive ordination into their ministry as deacons. The essential element was that in their lowly and loving service to others they authenticated the value of their own lives at the same time as they provided loving Christian help to those in need. They could be confident about the legitimacy of their way of life because they were living as servants of others after the manner of Jesus who came to serve, that is, to perform works of diakonia.

Changes

Turning now to the 1950s, we enter a situation where change is under way. The diaconal praxis is now in a process of adapting itself to the health and social services of the modern welfare state. The professional work had to be conducted in accordance with the official regulations. The activity was largely financed by official money. Many institutions were regarded as superfluous and were closed, while others survived only because of their ability to adjust to the new political context.

In theorizing on the basis of this new situation, the ethical dimensions of diaconal work became more focused. After World War II the responsible society had become an important concern. Social ethics was raised to a level of importance equal to that of traditional individual ethics. Within Lutheran theology, profession and work became new important expressions of Christian life. Within this framework, diakonia became a useful term to express Christian service in a secular world and to present a vision of a «Church for others» as a departure from older models of church.

This gave a new role to the diaconal worker as employee (*funksjonær*/functionary). Within such a role professional skills became more important than inner vocation. At the same time the connection with the public system was decisive. From the perspective of a functionalist society, diaconal work had the task of restoring people to normal function within society or, when this was not possible, to a life that was as functional as possible.

Turning now to the year 2000, we observe that the welfare state has great problems in maintaining its services and also its vision of a functionalist society. Privatization, public poverty, new social classes, and the growth of a pluralist society – are some elements in this new time that is called post-modern. The period may also be seen as post-uniform in the sense that different approaches are now opening up to social and cultural questions. In particular the idea is now acceptable that individuals should assume roles as agents in society.

This concept provides the potential for a new diaconal praxis which is less dependent on public structures and ideology. In recent years, this line of thinking has taken diakonia out of the traditional institutions and has prompted different new initiatives. A lot of diaconal work is now organized from the local congregation. Often it is more flexible, manifesting a readiness to encounter new challenges. Another characteristic is the new space created for volunteers.

In other words, what happens is a renewal of the ecclesial identity of diaconal work. This renewal finds expression not only structurally, such as when new bonds are made between church bodies and diaconal activities, but also rhetorically, in so far as the diaconal language is invested with new values arising from interpretation of early Christian discourse about diakonia.

Is it possible to find a sustainable theological basis for this new position while still calling this activity diakonia and claiming biblical and historical roots in the New Testament congregations?

Semantic basis for a diakonia for the 21st century

A new lexical description of the diakon- words appeared in the book *Diakonia: Reinterpreting the Ancient Sources*.¹⁰ This description was based on a survey of Greek literature, papyri and inscriptions for the period 400 BCE to around 400 CE. Academic reviews of this work have acknowledged the significance of the new findings.¹¹ According to the new study, the leading semantic and linguistic features of diakon- in ancient Greek, both Christian and non-Christian, can be summarized in the A1-F1 below. To make it easier for readers to compare these new characteristics with the earlier characteristics, the previous table A-F is presented first.

- A. Ordinary everyday word;
- B. Not religious;
- C. Basically means service at table;
- D. A word from terminology for slaves;
- E. Underwent a change of meaning in Christian circles;
- F. Represented lowly service of love like that of Jesus.

- A1. A word from the formal language of poetry and formal discourse;
- B1. Profoundly religious in its connotations, as in the service of the Gods;
- C1. Semantic field of go-between for roles which are specified by context;
- D1. Not specifically about slaves but about carrying out an authorised task;
- E1. No changes of meaning between Christian and other Greek usage;
- F1. The words never ever expressed loving service.

In this new outline of the semantic values of the diakon- words, each of the characteristics A1-F1 stands in opposition to the characteristics A-F outlined in the earlier table. Of course, the earlier values have long been built into the concept and theology of the deacon and of diakonia. Accordingly, unless the line of interpretation developed in the research volume of 1990 is shown to be unreliable, we have a new set of values with which to work if we are to construct a theology of diakonia reflecting the thinking of the early church.

To say this is not to suggest that we are obliged to repeat the practice of the early church in today's church. But it is saying, that in continuing to assert that the New Testament presented diakonia as a lowly service of love we are distorting its message. On the positive side, when we consider the values which the new linguistic description of diakonia presents to the church, we should rather be encouraged to build these values into the life and activity of the church.

¹⁰ Authored by John N. Collins, published in New York by Oxford University Press 1990. These findings have later been confirmed by other scholars', for instance Anni Hentschel: *Diakonia im Neuen Testament*, Tübingen 2007.

¹¹ A summary of these assessments accompanies the article «A Ministry for Tomorrow's Church», *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 32/2 [Spring 1995], 159–178.

The values associated with ideas in the boxes A1 and B1 are supportive of the idea of the church as an assembly of people who are deeply aware of the great blessings they have received. At once, then, we are in the presence of a group of words which are ecclesial in character. The idea of the go-between in box C1 is central to all Paul's description of his apostolic ministry as diakonia (e.g., 1 Corinthians 3:5; 2 Corinthians 5:18). This was not usage which he invented. It was simply usage which he took from traditional usage where, from Plato to Josephus and beyond to the Neo-Platonists, connections between heaven and earth were expressed through diakon- words.

Closely associated with the idea of the go-between is the idea of the authority belonging to the person who has received a mandate to deliver a message or to perform a task for a person or for a community. For example, Josephus often employed diakon- words for the purpose of emphasizing the imperial authority of Petronius, the Roman Governor of Syria instructed by Caligula in 40 CE to erect a statue of the emperor at the Temple in Jerusalem.

It is at this point of language that the question of the authority of the deacon must be raised in theology. The deacon carries the mandate of the congregation or of the bishop. For this mandate to be real, both congregation and bishop need to have recognized their own responsibilities towards the church itself and towards its surrounding society before they can presume to lay a mandate upon deacons to work within those spheres. This again has great potential to enlarge the ecclesial dimension of diakonia within the church. The diaconate and its work grow out of the church. This is enriching for the church and encouraging for the deacons.

If we can rightly summarize the call of the church as a call to a life of faith and to the expression of faith in love, we are invited to envisage the role of the deacon as unfolding across both these areas of faith and love. Within the congregation, the deacon may be called to support the reception of the word of the gospel. This might be in rituals of baptism or burial, etc., but it might also be in supporting and leading small groups to explore the experience of faith. In addition, the works of love are those in which deacons are already well trained and practiced.

Renewing praxis in the light of a renewed theory

What kind of diaconal praxis are we to see in the light of a new understanding of diakonia? How do we elaborate a theology of diakonia that can provide a meaningful and sustainable theoretical framework for such praxis?

What follows is a list of some items that in our opinion should belong to this new paradigm of diakonia for our time:

New role as agent: From a role of professional employee, where others are often reduced to being clients, to a role of facilitator, animator, and enabler. The intention here is to give others, especially those on the periphery, a status as subjects and agents who also operate within God's project with humankind. Thereby, they

take on an ecclesial significance even if they are often regarded as unqualified for such a status.

New authority: Breaking out of traditional servility and silent service, giving diaconal work its prophetic task, denouncing injustice, announcing the dignity of the lowly and God's liberating love incarnated in human reality.

New language: Leaving behind the functional language of professionalism, making room for new concepts and an inclusive way of speaking where the version of the voiceless and disempowered is defended. Replacing the monolithic professional discourse which has dominated diaconal praxis in recent decades with a discourse which is enriched by spiritual terms and expressions, and which provides space for social analysis, theological interpretation, personal motivation and vision.

New logic: Giving away the traditional demand that every act must be planned, functional, and for a specific purpose. Instead, taking the risk of giving praxis priority over theory, sometimes making options that seem meaningless, but always asking for new meaning from what praxis is teaching its agents.

New methods: In this time when new mechanisms of exclusion are at work in both church and society, diakonia has a special mandate to identify mechanisms of inclusion, to point at possible opportunities of diaconal praxis, and to develop methods that express its new role, new authority, new language and new logic.

An authoritative diaconate for pathfinders in the Church

Deacons live close both to the church and to the environment in which believers and non-believers live. Sensitive to faith and love as life-building powers, they are aware of their own identity as representatives of Jesus and of the congregation in helping others to be receptive to these powers. By moving into circles and lives where congregations do not reach, they reveal to the church the inner nature of its mission, inspiring the church to raise up more ministers, and reminding the church to love, listen to, and support its deacons. Deacons are the prophets of churches of the 21st century, challenging all to hear what the gospel is calling them to, and inviting all to live truly as members of one body – ecclesially. They are pathfinders.

CHAPTER 4

PROPHETIC DIAKONIA

Introduction

How can we identify the prophetic dimension of diakonia? How is this dimension rooted in our identity as a communion of churches and our biblical and theological heritage? And how should it be expressed in the world of today?

A basic assumption is that diakonia and its prophetic expression must be contextual. It must be sensitive to suffering and injustice, or expressed in ecclesiological terms: it must be incarnated in human reality, following the mandate the Lord gave his disciples, «As the Father has sent me, I also send you!» (John 20.21). The mission of the disciples, and consequently of the church, must be in continuity with the mission of Jesus and his incarnated presence in the world.

To be the church in diakonia implies a God-given mandate of participating in God's mission to the world. However, it also means a call to incarnated presence and action which implies a radical option for or with the poor, following the example of Jesus who healed, dignified and empowered the excluded of his time.

The first point accentuates the theological and ecclesiological fundamental of diakonia in all its action. The second point gives importance to human reality and the necessity of knowing it well. Diaconal reflection is therefore by nature interdisciplinary. It uses both theology and socio-political analysis and it is challenged both by the prophetic word in the Bible and by prophetic words of our time, especially by voices that give witness to the experiences of the poor and marginalized.

Empowering diakonia

The diaconal movement that grew out of in Germany in the 1830s was largely influenced by pietism that came to understand diakonia as humble service following the example of Jesus. Deaconesses and deacons were educated in the spirit of obedience and silent service, with the consequence that their lifestyle and performance very often was marked by servility. As a whole, institutional diakonia,

in spite of its important role in the development of modern health and social services, has expressed traits of the same attitude, for instance by its tendency to always remain loyal to the established order whether church structures or worldly authorities.

Could the same be said about international diakonia as it developed in the form of relief and development work some 40–50 years ago? Is there a similar loyalty to ruling and changing development ideologies and practices, mainly elaborated in the North, and to political authorities, both in the North and in the South? Such accommodation may be judged as necessary, as neutrality, or as professional performance. A more critical view would label this tradition as another version of diaconal servility.

The tradition of understanding diakonia as humble service evidently claims to be based on biblical teaching on narratives such as Jesus' washing the feet of his disciples (John 13), or the admonishment of following the example of Christ who «made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant» (Philippians 2:7). It should be noted that the Greek word *diakonia* does not appear in these passages, so it can be questioned if they play a decisive role when clarifying what is meant by this concept. More importantly, however, is the insight of recent research that interprets *diakonia* as the mission of an agent or as a go-between. The Greek words of *diakonia/diakonein* are related to Jesus in the gospels and they most frequently refer to the Messianic mission for which he is empowered by his heavenly Father.

In Luke 4:18ff, the mission of Jesus is announced as good news to the poor. His Messianic authority (Greek: *exousia*) was very different from that of the powerful of his time (Mark 10:42ff). It was not an authority **over** people, but an authority **for** people, manifested on occasions as when he healed the sick and included them in the life of society. His authority astonished people (Luke 9:8) who praised God for what they had seen him do. This same authority was expressed in the way in which he sat at table with people, having communion with them. It was also manifested when washing the disciples' feet, as authority to include into the messianic community, liberating his friends from whatever judgement that could disqualify them.

From this perspective, it is logical to move beyond the tradition of understanding diakonia as self-effacing, humble service. Diakonia is service commissioned by the Lord. It is empowered by God's Spirit, with the aim of lifting up the down-trodden, of dignifying the expendable, and of empowering the excluded. As such, diakonia expresses the healing service of the church – for the healing of the world.

How then do we understand Paul's saying in Philippians 2:8 that Jesus «humbléd himself by becoming obedient to death?» The Greek word used here does not necessarily mean «humbling oneself» in our modern way of speaking which would mean exposing oneself to shame or laughter, nor does it refer to an introvert individualist action as often idealised in pietistic ethics. Instead, it should be seen much more socially, as an act of moving in the direction of the lowly, motivated by love and solidarity. For Jesus, this was a voluntary action, a consequence of

being incarnated in human reality. Its purpose is not self-humiliation, but conscious mission in order to get close to the lost and to open a way to salvation for them.

A Latin American consultation on diakonia held in Florianópolis, Brazil recently came up with the new concept of *migrant diakonia*.¹² Referring to their social reality and its context of internal migration by which the poor are forced into even more cruel poverty, migrant diakonia expresses in a challenging way what «humbling oneself» means for the churches, as a conscious move to become more incarnated in peoples' lives, in their struggles and victories, in their faith and their hope. This understanding of diakonia is close to what may be presented as prophetic diakonia, as bold action empowered by God's Spirit, and as authority to speak and act in God's name.

Observations regarding prophetic diakonia

1. Prophecy is a biblical term and should be understood and used from that background. Sometimes political diakonia and prophetic diakonia are referred to as being the same, but in my opinion they should be differentiated. Political diakonia acknowledges that all diaconal action has political implications. Since diakonia takes place in the public sphere, it must be conscious of its socio-political role and be ready to speak out when that is necessary. Advocacy is therefore a normal part of diaconal work that constantly requires attention. Prophetic diakonia has a different accent. It relates to the intrinsic theological nature of diakonia, affirming the prophetic task as a part of the mandate and authority that God has given the church and its diakonia.

2. In the biblical tradition, prophecy appears as a response to divine revelation and a God-given mandate given to the prophet: «The word of the Lord came to me» (Jeremiah 1:1–10; Ezekiel 12–13). The prophetic word always manifests God's lordship and power, as in Amos 4.13: «For behold, He who forms mountains, and creates the wind, who declares to man what his thought is, and makes the morning darkness, who treads the high places of the earth – the Lord God of hosts is his name.» Similarly, it expresses God's concern for creation, especially for his people, reminding them that God is judge and redeemer, now and in times to come. In Isaiah 52.7–10 we read. «How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who proclaims peace, who brings glad tidings of good things, who proclaims salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns!' ... The Lord has made bare His holy arm in the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.» In a time like ours that has declared that history has come to its end, or that the market and worldly powers have the

12 Primer Encuentro Regional de Diaconía, Florianópolis, Brasil, 12–16 de octubre de 2002. Report published by the Lutheran World Federation, Geneva, 2003, 83.

power set the ultimate condition for human existence, the prophetic word reminds us that God is the Lord of history. It continues to be a word that judges and promises redemption.

3. How is the relationship between prophecy and diakonia established? Both have the task of finding ways, of building bridges in direction of renewal (repentance) and transformation. Diakonia is first and foremost action, intervention and movement so that transformation may take place. The concept of migrant diakonia expresses this very well.

4. Such diaconal action is never silent. It conveys a message of new times to come, in the tradition of the biblical prophets. It is important to notice that the prophets were strong defenders of justice. Their reaction reflects indignation that the God-given law had been broken, as when the rights of widows and orphans were ignored. There is a difference between this so-called apodictic law that was established at Mount Sinai and the casuistic law made by the elders who met at the gates of the city. The apodictic law was unquestionable, being part of the covenant between God and his people, it expressed God's promise of shalom and well-being for all people. That is why breaking it had such dramatic consequences.

5. To be prophetic therefore, means to defend justice. Consequently diaconal action should by its very nature include the task of unmasking injustice and promoting justice. For the prophets of the Old Testament, this task was undertaken within the framework of theocratic society. How to give continuity to this same task when theocracy no longer is viable as political option? One real option is to refer to human rights as a manifestation of apodictic law in our times. This gives sense to the understanding of rights-based diaconal action, as commitment and engagement for a just, participatory and sustainable society.

6. Prophetic diakonia is characterised by its divine mission. At the same time it is, according to its nature and due to its commitment to justice, oriented towards the margin of society, towards the poorest and their condition of life. This has both a sociological and a theological/ecclesiological implication making prophetic diakonia committed to the perspective of those located in the periphery of society. Here, a kind of diaconal sensibility must be developed so that the version of the last is heard first.

7. The fact that the prophets first addressed their message to the religious of their day, is another important observation to make. They also addressed the rich and mighty, such as the king, but within the rationality of theocracy. The prophets denounced the abuse of power, especially manipulations of religious ceremonies in order to appear as pious and lawful leaders. The installation of false prophets that announced what pleased the king was another expression of the violation of God's word.

What does this last point mean for prophetic diakonia? It could be that the prime focus of prophetic action should not be political institutions and secular entities. Although there are cases even today where such powers pretend to have religious sanction for what they do, and refer to a kind of metaphysical «it must be done» when they allow the poor to be sacrificed. It must however, be an equally important task for prophetic diakonia to address the church establishment in order to question how we are being «conformed to this world» (Rom 12.2) in dealing with burning issues of our time. Is it fair to say that the church at times has imitated structures of domination and exclusion? Have we too easily adopted a lifestyle of religious consumerism and ethical indifference instead of being profoundly provoked by the signs of growing poverty and injustice in the world? Could it be that our own performance as diaconal institutions needs prophetic questioning? How do we measure what we are and what we do? Is it done according to standards of efficiency and professional work, as defined in current manuals of development work? Or is it done according to the mandate given by the Lord: «As the Father has sent me, I also send you!»

8. A last point concerns the diaconal ministry as part of the ordained ministry of the church. Since the ordained ministry in Lutheran churches has traditionally become an office of the word, and as such permitted a tendency of centralising and monopolising power in the church, the establishing of the diaconal ministry could help to bring some balance, between word and doing, between centre and periphery. Also, international diakonia could use such a ministry of empowered action and transformation.

Conclusion

Without critical prophetic questions the church and its diakonia are easily trapped by triumphalism, ecclesiocentrism and other variants of the theology of glory. The church constantly needs to be renewed and reminded of its God-given mandate and to be on the road – even when this is a way of the cross.

CHAPTER 5

LIBERATING DIAKONIA

Diakonia in the context of new poverty

In September 2006 I participated at a consultation on *Poverty and the Mission of the Church*, held in Arusha, Tanzania, arranged by the Lutheran World Federation. We were challenged by presentations from different parts of Africa, describing the dehumanizing conditions posed by poverty and the negative impacts of economic globalization.

A woman pastor from Sierra Leone told how the civil war had brought atrocities never heard of before, and how thousands of child soldiers, so young that they hardly were able to carry their weapon, were left without a future now that the war is over. But she also told how Christian women had walked into the bush, bringing food to starving fighters, convincing their leaders to lay down their guns and bring an end to the suffering of people.

A church worker from Swaziland reported that close to 40 % of the population in that poor country is infected by HIV, and that in a growing number of households all adult family members have died from AIDS. A diaconal project tries to accompany the child-headed families. It certainly makes a difference to those assisted, but the demand is far beyond their capacities.

Confronted with these and many more tragic images of poverty, and at the same time knowing that Africa is endowed with an enormous wealth of natural and human resources, the church leaders who gathered in Arusha reaffirmed that «There can be no justifiable reasons for the excruciating poverty and all kinds of human-made suffering persistently experienced in Africa». They went on to declare that «In a time like this, the sinful forces that perpetuate poverty must be denounced and opposed. Such forces continue exploiting our lands and robbing millions of people of their God-given right to daily bread and a decent life. These forces include unjust economic systems, the escalation of conflict and violence, and the forced flight of people from their ancestral lands. Men, women and children have no more tears and are robbed of their rights, gifts and potential».¹³

Will it have any effect that church leaders make such a declaration affirming that the growing poverty in Africa is a scandal, both ethically and politically? Will their voices be listened to and lead to any change, above all for those most affected by poverty?

What sort of action would add weight to their message? Over decades the churches in Africa together with partners in the North have been engaged in humanitarian aid and in development work. Thousands of projects have been implemented. The question is however, whether this diaconal effort has really contributed to sustainable changes in society, and has empowered people to resist «the sinful forces» that produce poverty, such as neo-liberal power structures, bad governance and corruption.

In other words, what kind of diaconal action is needed in such a context of extreme poverty and injustice? Can diakonia be renewed in order to become liberating, both in the sense that it liberates churches to bold action in defence of the poor and marginalized, and also in a way that makes a difference in society, liberating people from bonds of exclusion and suffering, promoting human dignity and fundamental rights?

To some of us, the African context may seem far away and not very relevant for our discussion on how diakonia should be developed. On the other hand, in our part of the world there also are growing pockets of poverty. Also in our society, mechanisms of exclusion make people powerless. Some of the same ideological currents that have justified growing poverty in the global South are present in our own political reality. In a globalized world diakonia cannot be limited to the local context, not in its action, nor in its reflection. This is based on our confession that «the earth is Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it» (Psalm 24:1), and that diakonia is an affirmation of this faith.

How can diakonia be liberating?

From this introduction I have arrived at the theme of this paper: Liberating diakonia. The basic question remains the same for us as for church leaders in Africa: Is it possible to develop a diaconal praxis that is liberating, in the sense that is really makes a difference to people affected by suffering, need and injustice?

When the question is formulated like this, it is presupposed that not all forms of diaconal work are liberating. There is therefore a need of identifying methods that facilitate processes by which people and society are liberated from practices, structures and even mentalities that oppress. However, the question concerning liberating diakonia cannot be limited to methodology, which is a question of *how* to do diakonia. Immediately, links are made to another type of inquiry, namely

13 «Confronting Poverty and Injustice in Africa. A Message from the LWF Consultation on Poverty and the Mission of the Church in Africa, Arusha, Tanzania, 4th to 8th September 2006» (LWF 2007:15–16).

why should diakonia be liberating? This question takes us to the epistemological framework of diakonia and to the reflection on what motivates diaconal liberating action. *Liberating* and its related term *liberation* need to be reflected upon as interdisciplinary concepts, due to the fact that they belong to the socio-political context of diaconal action, and at the same time express aims embedded in the Christian identity that motivates and forms diakonia.

In the following pages I shall try to deal with these questions. I shall start by giving a brief account of how the *liberation* terminology was developed by Latin American theologians from the end of the 1960's, in the so-called *Theology of Liberation*, based on the presupposition that here we find the most thorough interdisciplinary reflection on liberation as both socio-political praxis and theological term. I shall indicate some of the impulses that this theological tradition has brought to diakonia, both in Latin America and here in Northern Europe.

Over the last 20 years, the theology of liberation has undergone important changes due to both internal and external factors. I shall present some of these and how new concepts have contributed to the emerging of what now often is called *Ecumenical diakonia* with the World Council of Churches as principal protagonist. *Prophetic diakonia* has become an often used expression within Ecumenical diakonia, and it may be said that this is just another way of saying *Liberating diakonia*.

In the last section I shall return to our Nordic context and to the question of what *Liberating diakonia* may mean here. I shall take up the critical question whether diaconal action as we know it needs to be liberated from patterns of understanding that have domesticated diakonia in a way that has made it a servile instrument of dominant ecclesial and political structures. Again, related to the basic question, can liberating diakonia make a difference in a world of growing poverty promoting human dignity and justice both in church and society?

The Latin American theology of liberation

As indicated above, it was during the revolutionary times of the late 1960's that theologians in Latin America rediscovered the potential of the term *liberation* for theological reflection. Peruvian Gustavo Gutiérrez stated in his now classical book, that the concept of liberation also was a reaction against the development terminology that was then at its height (Gutiérrez 1974). In the general mood of optimism that followed independence in Africa, development and development aid was expected to change not only the living conditions of poor people, but also the economic and social conditions of so-called developing countries.

Latin Americans may have been the first to raise fundamental questions concerning the ideology of development. From their own experiences they claimed that the real problem was not under-development, but oppressive structures that have plundered Latin America, draining its «open veins» as Uruguayan historian Eduardo Galeano put it (Galeano 1973). This perspective made it clear that the

people of Latin America are not poor, but have been made poor (*empobrecidos*) due to centuries of oppression and colonial exploitation, and through the establishment of social, political, cultural and even religious structures that systematically have marginalized the majority of the population from fair participation in society.

In the background of this reality, development as proposed by well-intended politicians in the North means perpetuating unjust structures that continue to produce poverty and dependency in the South. What is needed is liberation from such structures. While the ideology of development would present a picture of a harmonious move from poverty towards welfare according to models in the North, the advocates of liberation would point to the necessity of subverting structures of power and dependency.

Although the theologians of liberation initially picked the term liberation from the area of socio-political analysis, they soon discovered that it also had a strong theological significance. In the Old Testament, most prominently in the Exodus story, liberation is announced as God's liberating action. The prophets denounced the powerful who that oppress people and force them into poverty, and announce God's preferential option for the poor. According to the New Testament, Jesus fulfilled the promises of the prophets as expressed in the story of his appearance in the synagogue in Nazareth, when reading from the book of Isaiah: «The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free» (Luke 4:18).

The theology of liberation not only questioned the fact that liberation language often had been silenced in bible translations and in theology but it also introduced new methods of reading the bible, above all focusing on liberation as key concept of interpretation and on the space given to the poor in the biblical texts (Hanks 1983; Mesters 1989; Tamez 1983). At the same time, the poor were given a prominent role as interpreters of the bible. It was often said that when the poor read the bible, something unexpected happens to both the poor and to the text. The poor recognize their own life, their suffering and struggle in stories told in the bible, and they are empowered to believe and act according to the example of the biblical figures under the promise of future and hope for God's people. When the biblical text is reread in this manner, it often becomes a provocative message in today's context of poverty and struggle for human dignity. This so-called popular reading (*leitura popular da biblia*) has turned out to have an extraordinary capacity of mobilizing the grass-roots for social action. For the development of a liberating diakonia, this is of course a most interesting experience. Some of us have used this method in our part of the world and have found that in our own context it has also revealed a surprising capacity of empowering people.

The method of popular bible reading became an important expression in the life in the basic Christian communities (*comunidades eclesiais de base* = CEBs). They soon spread all over the continent in tens of thousands of grassroots groups of Christians. Their way of being church gave concrete expression to what theo-

logians of liberation described as *eclesiogenese*, a new birth of the church (Boff 1986; cf. Nordstokke 1996). Most of these Latin American theologians had earlier had a rather critical view of the church since they felt that the church often had supported oppressive structures in society and had also adopted pyramidal and paternalistic structures. If this opinion was largely built on an understanding of the church as social institution, this was radically revised with the emerging of the CEBs. Brazilian Leonardo Boff reminded himself and others of the fact that most people in Latin America are poor *and* believers (*pobres e crentes*). Gustavo Gutiérrez elaborated a discourse on the power of the poor in history (Gutiérrez 1983). Consequently an ecclesiology based on this reality was elaborated with «The church of the poor» and «The church from below» as central themes. Since they were rooted in the experiences of the CEBs it also opened a new understanding of the spirituality of poor people and how the sacramental life of the church is lived out.

This can be seen as an example of the basic methodological principle of the theology of liberation, namely that theory must be rooted in praxis, or as Gutiérrez formulated it: «Theology is critical reflection on praxis» (Gutiérrez 1974:6–15). Initially this was proclaimed as an «epistemological rupture» of turning away from «classical» theology that pretended to be above time and space. Instead, Gutiérrez and his colleagues argued that theology has to be aware of its context, and critically reflect on the church's praxis in this specific context, with the aim of renewing it so that it could be liberating.

Theology that limited itself to theoretical deliberations or only referred to academic praxis was rejected. Leonardo Boff talked about the captivity of theology and its need to be liberated, not for the sake of theology in the first place, but for the sake of liberation (Boff 1976). What matters is liberation, not a well formulated theology of liberation. In spite of the polemic tone of some of these statements, they lift up epistemological and methodological positions worth taking into consideration when we come back to the question of liberating diakonia, both as praxis and as critical reflection on praxis.

Added to this, it should also be observed that the Latin American theologians repeatedly underlined that they were talking about *liberation*, not *liberty*, again in opposition to what they described as the position of Western liberal ideology. The Portuguese word for liberation – *libertação* – contains two elements: *liber* (free) and *ação* (action). In other words, it does not contemplate an ideal status of liberty, but implies conscious intervention in order to change social reality. In this way it affirmed theory's close relation to praxis and to the well-known methodological method of *see – judge – act*. Taking into consideration the reference to the CEBs, we are brought back to the question initially raised: In what way can the church make a difference in the struggle for a just and human society, and what is role of diakonia in that endeavour?

I limit the presentation of the Theology of Liberation to the observations made so far, knowing that much more could be added. Although the Theology of Liberation is deeply marked by its Latin American context and the ideological

environment from the end of the 1960's, it has given a lasting contribution to theology in general. I shall list some of these contributions, and especially those that are relevant for diaconal work and reflection.

- a The insistent focus on the poor and their privileged role related to God's action in the world;
- b The conscious reference to the socio-political context and the use of interdisciplinary analysis of reality in theological reflection;
- c The elaboration of a methodology that links social praxis and theological reflection (see – judge – act);
- d The hermeneutics of suspicion and its critical question regarding interests and power, also when interpreting biblical texts.

Towards a liberating diakonia

With the references made above to the insights from theology of liberation, I shall conclude by making some observations en route towards liberating diakonia.

1. Within diakonia there has been a growing awareness of the need to move away from paternalistic patterns of action *for* people in need towards practices *with* people, in a way that allows marginalized people to be subjects in the effort of changing their conditions of life. It has been recognized that sometimes the traditional language of «clients» and «patients» has silenced people and made them dependant on the good intentions of the helper and his/her professional knowledge.

The pedagogy of liberation, originally formulated by Brazilian Paulo Freire, has stimulated diaconal workers to overcome such tendencies. *Participation* and *empowerment* have become key concepts in diaconal praxis. Within social work, empowerment is used both to designate the process by which marginalized people assume the role of subjects in the *process* of changing their destiny, and also the *goal* of that process.

However, it should be remembered that empowerment always implies a *shift of power*, which means that imbalances of power must be dealt with critically. Liberation diakonia should constantly raise this issue, not only in society and in the relations between helpers and those helped, but also with reference to diaconal praxis and how power is established and executed in the life of the church. Too often the question of power is silenced in the church, and in some cases it is even disguised behind service language.

2. Diaconal education, as we know it in Northern Europe, has always been *interdisciplinary*. Theological formation has been combined with formation in the areas of health and social services. Theologians of liberation have pointed to the importance of exercising interdisciplinary reflection *critically*. From this position,

they have strongly criticised what they call «reformist» practices, which concentrate its effort in integrating those with problems into the already existing social order. This practice tends to overlook the structural and ideological reasons behind human suffering. Instead, it focuses on the individual and his/her responsibility for being in need. Moralistic attitude, either religious or political, often accompanies such practice. Neo-liberal social politics and the efforts of «modernizing» the welfare system through privatization and individualisation will often follow this line of reaction. A liberating diakonia should question this development and be committed to a broad analysis of social and human problems. It should stand up for solutions that favour collective values, solidarity and responsibility.

3. For diaconal praxis the question of *methodology* is crucial. No method is neutral, but instead is value-loaded. It must be a primary task for liberating diakonia to identify methods of work that favour participatory processes and empowerment. The method of *see – reflect – act*, as developed by Latin American theologians of liberation has been widely accepted as one useful tool of connecting theory to praxis, also related to diakonia. It gives space for silent knowledge from praxis, and for voices that do not always have access to disciplined reflection. According to present political thinking, effectiveness is often presented as the most important criteria of social work. This should be questioned critically, because effectiveness is often determined only according to economic measures, and not to a wider spectrum of the effects of social intervention.

4. *The hermeneutics of suspicion*, as formulated in the theology of liberation, implies always asking whose interests are behind what is said and done? The world and its problems look different from the perspective of the powerful than from the perspective of marginalized groups. Liberating diakonia has to be aware of this conflict and give space to voices that are ignored. Ecumenical diakonia states that such practice belongs to good biblical tradition, pointing in the direction of prophetic diakonia. In my opinion, it is not possible, from a theological point of view, to institutionalize prophetic action. This does not, however, contradict the ambition of diakonia to act and speak out in a way that may be interpreted as prophetic in the sense that, in the name of God, injustice is denounced and a future and hope for the poor are announced.

5. Finally, with the question of liberating diakonia also remains a question of whether diakonia itself needs to be liberated. For a long time, pietistic spirituality and worldview dominated the diaconal movement. Diaconal workers were educated to be humble, submissive and silent. It also led to an individualistic understanding of diakonia in the sense that the individual in his or her vocation as deacon or deaconess personalised the identity of diakonia. This person-oriented concept of diakonia implied that the ecclesial dimension of diakonia, as an integral part of the church's nature and public expression was lost. Today, diakonia has largely been liberated from this tradition, although it reappears from time to time.

Instead, another form of «captivity» has developed as diakonia in many places, and especially in its institutionalised form, has been fully integrated into public health and social service. From a critical perspective this can be said to have led to three-fold dependency: firstly, on public money and, consequently, on the conditions for receiving such money; secondly, on the professional demands for action within the public system and the resulting consequences for recruiting personnel and establishing standards of professional work; and, thirdly, on the ideological framework set by the secular welfare state as formulated in the legal framework for such services. This state of dependency has made it very difficult for diaconal institutions to express their specific diaconal identity. The link to church life, both locally and nationally, has been weakened.

There may, of course, be different opinions as to whether this situation should be regarded as a problem. It may be considered an overstatement to describe this as captivity from which diakonia should be liberated. The crucial question, however, is whether diakonia is given the freedom to be liberating when established in such close symbiosis with public health and social service. Furthermore, within secularised modernity, dichotomy is established between reason and faith in a way that may limit diaconal work to doing only what is meaningful according to secular rationality. The holistic approach, as proposed both by the theology of liberation and ecumenical diakonia, will not be expressed easily within this framework, unless diakonia takes steps towards bold and liberating action in its interpretation of its social and political contexts, in its options regarding methodology and value-orientation, and last, but not least, in defining its vision and what it is aiming at. Such liberating diakonia would make a difference!

PART II: THE DIACONAL MINISTRY

CHAPTER 6

THE DEACON IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

When deaconesses and deacons were introduced to Norwegian church life in the second half of the 19th century, their roles were formed by the contemporary diaconal movement in Germany. Its vision was to restore the diaconal ministry as witnessed in the New Testament, which was thought to have been lost generations later as a consequence of the emerging hierarchical structures in the church that led to the Roman Catholic tradition where the diaconate became a transitory ministry on the way to priesthood.

Within this movement, the story about the installation of the Seven in Acts 6 often was given an important position in documenting the diaconate's biblical foundation, and also with the understanding that the Apostles themselves had introduced this ministry. This could also be normatively read in the sense that something essential about being church would be missing if it did not have an ordered diaconal ministry.

What follows will show how the Greek word *diakonia* (English: service) together with the related words *diakonein* (to serve) and *diakonos* (servant) are used in the New Testament and thereby also in the earliest history of the church. They will be referred to as the *diak*-words. A closer look will be given to the narrative in Acts 6:1–6 because it has played an important role in the development of the diaconate. Recent research however, has raised critical questions regarding the traditional reading of this passage.

From this perspective the question of to ground the diaconate as biblically conceptualized in our church life today will be explored. A «fundamentalist» approach is rejected which would claim that the Bible contains an unquestionable indication of how church-related concepts and structures are understood and should be practiced. The same is true for a «lexical» approach that does not recognize that over time these concepts have been shaped by context and practice in a way that has added new aspects to their understanding. It should be recognized

that the term *diakonia* as used today has more roots than those immediately identifiable in biblical texts. The usage of the *diak*-words in the New Testament also stimulates critical questions and new perspectives to our understanding of diakonia in general, and also for defining the role of the diaconal ministry.

The deacon

When the New Testament was written, *diakonos* was a common word. It makes sense to generally translate it to «servant» in English, but with the notion that the servant is a respected person, esteemed both because of the relationship to his master and to the kind of tasks that he would be asked to perform. His *diakonia*, which can also be translated «mission» could be that of being a messenger, mediating contact and confidence. He could also have a role during religious meals, as a waiter or as divine messenger (Collins 2002:90–91). There must be a distinction drawn between *diakonos* and *doulos* (slave). The first is given a respectful position and placed in important relationships, the second belongs to an inferior social class and is owned by his master (Aalen 1980:172–173). We never-the-less find these two words used in the New Testament as if they were synonyms (Matthew 20:26–27 par.), but the point is that both are committed to subordination and obedience under the master's will, with readiness to renounce their own interests in performing service. The example of Jesus who, «by taking the very nature of a servant (*doulos*) [...] humbled himself by becoming obedient to death» (Philippians 2:7–8) has in many ways framed this ministry, having in mind both situations of painful humiliation that such service may lead to, and even more so the relationship to God and God's plan of salvation.

The etymology of the *diak*-words is uncertain. The prefix *dia-* indicated «through» or «by the means of,» while the second part, *-konos*, is unclear. One tradition with roots back to the Early Church suggests that the root is *konis* (dust), which may refer to the dust that is raised when the servant rushes to fulfill his task, or to the readiness to become dirty if required. Language experts are doubtful about this; some think that the root may be *enkoneo*, a verb that means «to hurry.» A deacon is someone who hurries to complete the task given to him (Starnitzke 2007:85).

The view that a deacon serves at the table and performs humble service is strongly questioned in recent research. It has been documented that the *diak*-words have a much broader use in contemporary Greek. The deacon could also be given the duty of waiting at banquets, but he would normally be commissioned to many other tasks. What really mattered, was his the relation to his master who entrusted him to undertake important missions in his name. In the Christian context this meant the relationship to the bishop and to Christ as Lord. Instead of portraying humble and self-effacing service, the title conveys being assigned to mediating important messages, as a go-between, and also as a pathfinder in realizing the mission of the church (Nordstokke & Collins 2000:110–111).

Diakonos is found 29 times in the New Testament;¹⁴ while *diakonein* is found 37 times and *diakonia* 34. For *diakonos*, eight instances of usage are found in the Gospels, with 21 letters attributed to Paul. It should be noted that Luke does not use *diakonos*, in either his Gospel nor in Acts. The other *diak*-words however, are frequently found (19 times) in his writings.

In a few cases *diakonos* is used in a broad sense, about persons who perform tasks on behalf of others. This is the case of the king's servants in the parable of the royal wedding (Matthew 22:13) and the waiters at the wedding in Cana (John 2:5.9).¹⁵ Elsewhere, *diakonos* is used in sayings by Jesus on discipleship. In John 12:26 it is said that where he is, will his *diakonos* also be. This follows comments regarding his mission with the image of the kernel of wheat that falls to the ground and dies. In substance this corresponds to the announcement that «whoever wants to become great among you must be your *diakonos*» (Matthew 20:26 and par: Matthew 23:11 and Mark 9:35; 10:43). The relationship to Jesus is fundamental, «he who came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many» (Mark 10:45, Matthew 20:28).

While in the Gospels, Jesus uses *diakonos* referring to all disciples, the Pauline letters reserve the term for persons assigned to special tasks. In most cases they are called God's servants or servants of the Gospel and as part of this assignment they perform certain tasks. The Apostle Paul presents himself in the same manner (Romans 15:8; 1 Corinthians 3:5; 2 Corinthians 3:6; 6:4; Ephesians 3:7; Colossians 1:23.25), and also his co-workers Tychicus (Ephesians 6:21; Colossians 4:7); Epaphras (Colossians 1:7), Timothy (1 Timothy 4:6; 1 Thessalonians 3:2) and Phoebe (Romans 16:1).

In only two cases (Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8–12), is *diakonos* used as a title, designating a position in the church. It may be that Phoebe is referred to in a similar manner in Romans 16:1. Most scholars think Paul uses the word here in a wider understanding and in recognition of her contribution to the congregation. The impression is given that she has traveled to Rome representing the congregation in Cenchrea, perhaps as a messenger for Paul (Collins 2002:73–76). If this is included in the number of passages where *diakonos* is referring to an ordered ministry, the total number would be four, while the term designates church-related service in a wider sense 14 times, but with a focus on the role as messenger and mediator.

Four passages in Paul use the term differently. In Romans 13:4, worldly authority is described as God's *diakonos*, and 2 Corinthians 11:15 refers to Satan's servants. The word is used in rhetoric questions: Are his opponents in Corinth servants of Christ? (2 Corinthians 11:23); Is Christ a servant of sin? (Galations 2:17).

14 In addition comes 1 Tess 3:3 which is uncertain because it is missing in some of the oldest manuscripts.

15 According to Jewish tradition the bridegroom's youth friends were in charge of serving during the wedding celebration.

In these passages the basic understanding of the concept of the *diakonos* being assigned to a task commissioned by his master is maintained.

Bishop and deacon

In both passages where deacon appears as a title, bishops are also mentioned. In Philippians 1:1 the opening greeting is directed to «all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with their *episkopois* and *diakonois*». It is a surprise that both groups are presented in plural taking into consideration that at least the later practice would rule that there should only be one bishop in one place, while there could be more deacons. Do the titles here refer to established positions, or rather temporary tasks? (Barnett 1995:33–36; Collins 2002:87–95). This uncertainty is reflected in several bible translations, as in the 2004 Norwegian translation that renders «overseers and congregational servants» (*tilsynsmenn og menighetstjenere*). The text does not say anything about the relationship between the two groups beyond the fact that the bishops are mentioned first, but with nothing about their functions. It can be argued that this is the very first indication of the emerging leadership structure in the church, with the bishop as leader and the deacon as his assistant.

The first letter to Timothy is written later, and gives the impression that the leadership structure has now been established (Barnett 1995:36–41; Collins 2002:97–101). The titles bishop, deacon and presbyter (elder) seem to be well known and instructions can therefore be given on how to perform these ministries (1 Timothy 3:1–13; 5:17–22). The deacons appear together with the bishops here and both are expected to have a good reputation. Nothing is said regarding the tasks of the deacon. The admonishment of «not pursuing dishonest gain» (Timothy 3:8) indicates that the position can be misused and points therefore in direction of the administrative responsibility such as taking care of the common chest and distributing money and other means to the poor.

The passage about the deacons contains an additional reference to the women. They «are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything» (Timothy 3:11). Some read this as a general statement about the role of women in the congregation. But as it is placed within the instruction given to the deacons, it seems more likely that it either refers to the deacon's wives, or to women deacons. As nothing is said about the bishop's wives, the last interpretation is the most logical. In that case it proves that women could be deacons in the Early Church.

Women deacons

1 Timothy 3:11 is not the only reference that witnesses that women could have leadership roles in the time of the New Testament. In Romans 16:1–3, Phoebe is

presented as a deacon who «has been the benefactor of many people.» As noted above, it is not quite clear whether Paul uses *diakonos* in a wider sense, or whether he recognizes that Phoebe has been installed as deacon by her own congregation. It is also not clear what is meant by «benefactor of many people.» Most likely she has shown hospitality when Paul and other travelers arrived in Cenchrea, one of Corinth's seaports. It could also be that she would intervene when someone entered into difficulties such as imprisonment. In any case, it is obvious that she had a leading position and the needed authority to act when needed.

Phoebe is only one of many witnesses affirming that women played a more prominent role in the early Christian congregations than has been assumed. This is probably in continuity with the practice that Jesus had introduced to the community of disciples. Luke tells about women that accompanied Jesus and the Twelve, they «were helping to support them out of their own means» (Luke 8:1–3). Also in connection with Jesus' death there is reference to the women who had followed him «to care for his needs» (Matthew 27:55–56). In both these passages the verb *diakonein* is used and it indicates active service with responsibility for important tasks.

The position of women in the life of the Early Church is also expressed in 1 Timothy 5:3–16 regarding widows. There is the impression that this has become a large and influent group, and that it has become necessary to limit access to it. An age limit for admission is set and good reputation made a condition. It seems that the widows have assumed a caring ministry; among the requirements set for them are «showing hospitality, washing the feet of the Lord's people, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds» (Timothy 5:10). This resembles the way Luke describes Tabitha and the widows in Joppa (Acts 9:36–49).

We are not informed about the relationship between deacons and widows. The same is the case of deaconesses that appear in *Didascalia Apostolorum*, a treatise on church order originating from northern Syria around 230 CE. According to this document, the first duty of the deaconess was to assist the bishop in the baptism of women by anointing their bodies and ensuring that their nudity was not seen. Beyond this duty, the deaconess had the responsibility of teaching and instructing the newly baptized women, apparently serving as a spiritual mother exhorting them to chastity.

Early in the second century, Pliny who was governor in the Roman province of Bithynia located along the Black Sea, wrote to Emperor Trajan mentioning Christian women *ministrae* (Schottroff 1990:240–241). This may be a Latin translation of deacons. In any case it affirms that women were entrusted with important leadership roles in the early history of the church. Later this role was limited, probably as a consequence of the establishment of a hierarchical structure and the process of adapting to the cultural context that expected women to be subordinated to men's authority.

Acts 6 – the first deacons?

There is an ancient tradition of reading Acts 6:1–6 as a narrative of the installation of the very first deacons. The first known witness of this interpretation is Bishop Irenaeus who resided in Lyons in the last half of the second century. Today a majority of scholars reject this view (Collins 2002:47–58; Barnett 1995:28–33). One reason is that they are not presented as deacons in the text itself. Two of them, Stephen and Philip, appear later in the book of Acts; the first provoked Jewish listeners with his harsh speech and was the first Christian to suffer martyrdom; the second is presented as an evangelist in the region of Samaria where he led an Ethiopian to Christian faith and baptism. It should be noted that Stephen is said to have «performed great wonders and signs among the people» (Acts 6:8). Philip is reported to have performed signs, «many who were paralyzed or lame were healed» (Acts 8:5–8).

The background for the installation of the Seven was an emerging conflict in the church in Jerusalem. The Hellenistic Jews felt that their widows were overlooked in the daily *diakonia* (6:1). It is not quite clear what is meant by daily *diakonia*. In many bible translations it is rendered «the daily distribution of food,» although this is not explicitly expressed in the text. There is however, a reference to «table,» which may indicate participation in the communion of believers and their sharing of gifts, belonging to the same table. Those of Greek language felt they were excluded in a time when the church was growing. Thus, starting with language difficulties, it was developing as a growing cultural and perhaps also ethnic conflict that was threatening to divide the congregations. In order to deal with this threat, the Seven were elected. Their names show that they most likely were of Hellenistic background and therefore able to go between the groups facilitating better communication. The establishment of this leadership group envisaged that the church remained inclusive, a vital concern not only for those experiencing excluding behavior, but also for the church itself and its ethos. The task given to the Seven corresponds in many ways to what later deacons would do so it is not surprising that they later were considered the first deacons.

Whether the daily *diakonia* referred to food or other gifts, its main focus is the church's being as a communion of solidarity. The narrative in Acts 6 thus appears as a positive alternative to the story about Ananias and Sapphira in the anterior chapter (Acts 5:1–11), and in continuity with what had been announced as the lifestyle of the church on Pentecost Day: «All the believers were together and had everything in common» (Acts 2:44).

A key question in the interpretation of this passage is the meaning of «*diakonia* of the table» as compared to «*diakonia* of the word» (Acts 6:7). Does this refer to caring services versus proclamation, or community work versus public witness? It is not possible to draw final conclusions regarding these questions. It is probably incorrect however, to separate them as strictly as has become common in our time. The first generations of Christians linked intimately together what was announced publicly and what was celebrated at the table. Both belonged to what they

conceptualized as *diakonia*, as the gift to be shared and the task for which they were commissioned (German: *Gabe – Aufgabe*).

The qualifications of the Seven should also be noted. They were «known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom» (Acts 6:3). After being selected, they were presented to the Apostles «who prayed and laid their hands on them» (Acts 6:6). This indicates a rite of empowerment for leadership and also transfer of authority and shows that the church was able to renew its structure when needed.

Church order and leadership in the New Testament

From what has been presented above it should be clear that it is not possible to ground today's diaconate by simply refer to the word *diakonos* in the New Testament. Its pattern of usage is different than what has become the tradition in our churches today. This is not unique since the same is true for words such as priest, liturgy and mission. The understanding of such concepts has been shaped throughout the history of the church. This fact does not imply that they lose their significance theologically.

It should therefore not be considered a problem that we cannot tell when and how the diaconate was permanently established. The story about the Seven in Acts 6 cannot be read for that purpose. In fact, the New Testament does not present fixed church structures, nor does it contain clear instructions of how leadership roles should be modeled (Ladd 1993:579).

It has sometimes been maintained that the first Christian congregations were charismatic and that a firm leadership emerged at a later stage. Today most researchers agree that this is incorrect. From the very beginning authority was exercised through fixed leadership, especially when proclaiming the Gospel and presiding at worship services. The Apostles were the first to hold such positions, even though their authority could be challenged as happened when Paul criticized Peter for withdrawing from the communion of table with Christians that were not circumcised (Galatians 2:11–12).

Performing leadership was not without problems in newly established congregations and this is well documented in the Pauline letters, and especially related to the church in Corinth. Here tensions had grown between different parties who supported different leaders and their authority (1 Corinthians 1:10–16; 3:1–23), and also to charismatic groups who seem to have rejected the established leadership (1 Corinthians 14). In this situation Paul gives no instructions on how to organize the church. Instead he focuses on basic principles such as decent behavior and order (1 Corinthians 14:40), he emphasizes what will serve the well-being of the whole communion as a body where all members are important and called to mutual care (1 Corinthians 12:12–26), and above all he affirms the tradition of the apostles and its central message of Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected (1 Corinthians 1:23–25; 15:1–11).

From this point of departure Paul refers to different leadership roles (1 Corinthians 12:28–31). None of them represent a position for their own sake but their purpose is always the well-being of the communion and its marks as the body of Christ. «There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord» (1 Corinthians 12:4–5). Diversity is an asset when leadership is performed in a way that affirms the unity in Christ, and upholds the aim to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining the whole measure of the fullness of Christ» (Ephesians 4:11–13). Acts 6 illustrates this well in the story about the installation of the Seven. It gives witness to flexibility and focuses on purpose when establishing a new group of leaders.

Paul's saying about kinds of gifts (Greek: *charisma*) and kinds of service (*diakonia*) in 1 Corinthians 12:4–5 is normally interpreted so that the first refers to charismatic conduct (1 Corinthians 14:26), and the second to established leadership. This does not necessarily mean a strict separation between the two. It may well be that the saying is formulated in accordance with contemporary rhetoric style: when something important is uttered, it is done twice and preferably using different words. What follows in the passage seems to affirm this. After listing different leadership roles, Paul concludes: «There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work» (1 Corinthians 12:6).

Only at a later stage is a fixed leadership structure established. Indications of this development can be found in certain passages in the New Testament, mainly in the later letters. In Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:1–13 bishop and deacon appear together, as it became common in the time that followed. According to Hammann this practice seems to have become the norm by the end of the first century (Hammann 2003:27). This was especially true in the Greek speaking congregations, while those of Jewish background would follow the tradition from the Synagogue and be led by a council of elders (Greek: *presbyteros*, later developed to «priest» in English). Later these two traditions met and a hierarchy developed with the priest placed between the bishop and the deacon. But now more generations have passed, and the information is quite limited, which makes Collins remark that «we would be advised not to attempt to draw too many firm conclusions about any of the developments nor to fashion a critique of the modern diaconate against the shadowy patterns of the era» (Collins 2002:97).

Does it make sense to talk about ordered ministries at the time of the New Testament? Would the diaconate be considered as one? Such questions cannot be easily answered. It should be kept in mind that the concept of ministry has developed through history and that the Lutheran understanding is largely influenced by the theology of the Reformers as well as by German language (*Amt*). Already the translation from Greek *diakonia* to Latin *ministerium* brings in new connotations when using this term for church leadership. This is also the case with English *ministry*, although less than German *Amt*. In a similar manner the understanding of «ordered» or «ordained» ministry has changed due to the historical develop-

ment of the church. It would therefore be anachronistic to use these terms uncritically in the context of the New Testament.

On several occasions the New Testament relates that persons who were introduced to certain services were prayed for and hands were placed on them. This happened when Paul and Barnabas were commissioned by the church in Antioch (Acts 13:1–3), and also when they in turn installed elders to lead newly established churches (Acts 14:23). They knew this practice from the Synagogue, it was understood as a blessing, but probably also as an act of transferring authority. The statement in 2 Timothy 1:6 is interesting in that Timothy is reminded by the author «to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands.» We find however, no precise description or regulation of this practice in the New Testament. Nor do we know which leadership groups it included.

Deacon and diakonia

What so far has been developed shows that *diakonos* in the New Testament is strongly rooted in the identity of the church and its mission in the world, and also that it must be seen together with the two other *diak*-words, the verb *diakonein* and the noun *diakonia*.

As noted above, *diakonia* has often been defined as «humble service» or «serving at the table.» Recent research, initially represented by the Australian theologian John Collins, has documented that «serving at table» is just one of more meanings of the word, and not the most prominent one (Collins 1990 and 2002). He has also strongly questioned the interpretation of *diakonia* as humbly serving the poor. As is the case in contemporary Greek *diakonia* most often it is used to designate a task or a mission commissioned by someone. Paul specifically uses the word in this meaning about his ministry for God or for the Gospel (Romans 11:13; 15:17). In other words, he used it in a wide sense and not specifically caring for poor or sick persons.

It would however, be misleading to limit the understanding of *diakonia* to the task of announcing the Christian message by words. Paul also refers to the «*diakonia* of reconciliation» (2 Corinthians 5:18) and he also uses the word for the collection of money in favor of the church in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8–9). The wide use of *diakonia* points most importantly in the direction of the one in whose service the *diakonos* stands, and not so much on what kind of tasks he is given. This reflects what has been elaborated above on the deacon's role as go-between, as envoy and as mediator.

This interpretation is in conflict with the traditional understanding that goes back to the Reformers, and especially to Calvin who limited the understanding of *diakonia* to serving the poor and therefore wanted to re-establish the order of deacons within the Church's ministry for that purpose (Latvus 2008). The diaconal movement that emerged in Germany in the 1830s affirmed this tradition and developed an understanding of *diakonia* as love for the neighbor in need, as caring

service and nursing the sick. This concept of humble service was also idealized by pietism. From this context it was introduced to theological dictionaries and discourses strongly represented by H. W. Beyer who wrote about diakonia in the very influential *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* (Beyer 1935; English: Theological Dictionary of the New Testament).

The reinterpretation of the *diak*-words does not imply however, that they are without relation to how we use and understand diakonia and diaconal ministry today. The reason why these concepts gained such an important position in the New Testament writings cannot be limited to their use in contemporary Greek. In a special way they linked to the proclamation of Jesus who did not come to «to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many» (Mark 10:45). In the community's collective memory of Jesus, his *diakonia* was transmitted in a way that included both word and deed, as for instance as found in Acts 10:37–38: «You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached— how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.» Healing the sick, liberating the possessed from the forces of evil, including the marginalized in the communion – these are all important signs of the Kingdom that Jesus brought near, as he announced his mission in the Synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:18–19). The same understanding is expressed in the answer to John the Baptist, «Go back and report to John what you hear and see, The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor» (Matthew 11:4–5).

Care for people in need – that suffer, are marginalized or made victims of injustice – constitutes an integral part of the messianic mission of Jesus, and thus of his *diakonia*. It is equally clear that this dimension also is integrated in the mission given to his disciples. We see this on the occasion of the sending of the Twelve (Matthew 10:8), and also when Jesus after being resurrected, renews their vocation and mission (John 20:21).

It is therefore not fortuitous when it is said about the congregation in Jerusalem that «there were no needy persons among them» (Acts 4:34). The same is expressed in the effort to reorganize it in order to maintain this quality as community (Acts 6:1–6), and the campaign for collecting money in their support (1 Corinthians 16:1–4). In this way the including care of Jesus is given continuity. The immediate concern for «those who belong to the family of believers» did not imply less attention to the call to «do good to all people» (Galations 6:10). Rather, it meant that without such focus the church could lose its role as a sign to the outside world and the strength to realize its mission commissioned them by the Lord.

Diakonein is a central concept in the way Jesus interprets his mission. His presence among the lowly, his care for sick and suffering persons, his denouncing of injustice and hypocrisy and his action of including marginalized give meaning to understanding his diaconal mission and of identifying a fundamental diaconal

dimension of the mystery of incarnation and of the Kingdom that he brought near. This remains the main reason for presenting diakonia as a dimension of being church and of its mission.

Is the diaconate necessary according to the New Testament?

It can be concluded that the New Testament does not give a clear picture of the diaconate as an established ministry, nor does it contain clear directions regarding its position and the function. This admitted, it must also be stated that some indications are given in direction of what later should be developed by pointing first to the diaconal identity of the church and the necessity of establishing a leadership structure that focuses on the practical implications of this identity.

This may be interpreted as openness for a diversity of church structures according to what is needed related to present challenges and to what measures may be taken in order to strengthen the church for its mission in the world. The decision to establish a diaconal ministry in the church should not be considered to be «biblical,» responding to a binding requirement given in the New Testament, but rather as an option based on theological reflection on what it implied to be church and where the biblical material urges ways of being that foster its diaconal nature. In this perspective the diaconate becomes a potential for good leadership and competence that may help the church realize its vocation and to take action that manifests what it is called to be by its Lord.

CHAPTER 7

THE DIACONATE: MINISTRY OF PROPHECY AND TRANSFORMATION

«*We are ordinary servants; we have only done our duty*» Luke 17:10

The purpose of this article is to posit a line of interpretation of the diaconate that starts from the perspective of ecclesiology and relates to very basic questions of the Church's identity and mandate. What does it mean to be the Church of Jesus Christ in today's world? Does this identity imply a specific way of being, in order to respond to the mandate given by the Lord? How is the Church incarnated in the human reality? What impact does this have on the diaconate?

This line of interpretation is suggested in the context of the fact that there are basic differences in understanding the diaconate which soon appear when deacons from different churches begin to discuss it. For example, while Lutherans see deacons as belonging to the tradition of *diakonia*, (traditionally understood as charity work organized by the Church and interpreted as rooted in the Greek concept of *diakonia*,) Anglicans do not have the same tradition. In their context, deacons have their role according to the tradition of ordained ministry. It is therefore not immediately evident why exactly charity work should be a particular task for deacons. Within the Anglican setting, social responsibility has a well-rooted tradition, and often under this heading deacons are involved in charity work and other forms of social action. However, such responsibility has not been looked upon as the *proprium* of the diaconate, nor has it led to the development of an anglicized form of the word *diakonia*¹⁶ to describe this activity. It should

¹⁶ In a number of European languages (e.g. German and the Nordic languages), a form of the word *diakonia* appropriate to that language has been developed. The word «deacony» has been coined in translation from those languages but is not in general use in English lexicography. Cf Hall 2000.

therefore be noted that in spite of the fact that in both the Anglican and the Lutheran traditions, churches ordain deacons, the position and the self-understanding of an Anglican deacon may be quite different from that of a Lutheran deacon.¹⁷

Research has indicated that references to Scripture and church history only give limited help in bridging these differences, since it is difficult to form a clear picture of the deacon's role and function in the time of the New Testament. The problem is not whether the diaconate has been part of the Church's ministry from the very beginning, but rather that major changes have occurred between what deacons were then and what they are today. It is therefore difficult to give a normative interpretation of the office of the deacon from only terminological or historical arguments.

In the following endeavor to take a different line of interpretation and to give the diaconate legitimacy through ecclesiological reflection, particular importance will be accorded to experiences in the South, and above all to the methodological approach of the Latin American theology of liberation. Here theory and praxis are deeply interwoven, which make it necessary when the church is being studied, to refer to sociology and to the normal behavior of social organisms.

Furthermore, this method implies a critical perspective in relation to power and power structures, and a commitment to those placed at the periphery. Special reference will be made to the discussion within the Roman Catholic Church where there has been lively debate on this issue.

Finally, the concepts of «prophecy» and «transformation» been chosen as possible expressions of the kind of role the diaconate may assume within an ecclesiological understanding. Both concepts are in current use within the ecumenical movement.¹⁸ «Prophecy» in this context means critical opposition to structures and powers that cause injustice and exclusion, and also advocacy in favor of those who are victimized by these forces. The prophets of the Old Testament and their way of relating action to theological vision are the models for this role. «Transformation» is now preferred to concepts such as «social change» and «development» because of the ability to include theological dimensions.¹⁹

17 Cf. the broad description of the ministry of deacons within four of the Churches of the Porvoo Communion, in Borgegård & Hall 1999.

18 In a report dated 13 March 2000 to the WCC Programme Committee, the Advisory Group on Regional Relations and Ecumenical Sharing comments on the overall context of globalization and welcomes further reflection on ecumenical *diakonia*: «In this context ecumenical *diakonia* cannot be divorced from prophetic *diakonia*. This in turn is intertwined with ecumenical advocacy, which places the affected people at the centre stage, acting as their own advocates. Ecumenical *diakonia* must thus embrace a variety of forms, including crisis intervention and direct aid for the victims, but it was also strongly affirmed that Christian commitment to diaconal action must be coupled with transformative prophetic *diakonia*, which is change-orientated and boldly addresses root causes».

Centre and periphery

«Every institution attempts to monopolize imagination in the interest of order, propriety, purity, efficiency, competence, and control, while wanting at the same time to be democratic, porous and open» (Brueggemann 1991:189). This statement by Walter Brueggemann is both of sociological and ecclesiological relevance. Social scientists have documented how institutions tend to develop mechanisms of maintenance and self-regulation. Even institutions that have been established for the benefit of others will normally and increasingly pay attention to matters that condition their own existence, reputation and ability to grow in importance.

In addition, the culture of the organization will normally develop a «monopoly of imagination» that gives centralized power the right to decide what is meaningful and possible in determined situations. Some of us have met public welfare institutions that express an absolute centralized and monopolized structure where at the best, we are given the role of being passive consumers of the services promised by these institutions.

It is well known that political institutions may also take the form of monopolies, both in exercising power and in permitting imagination. History gives endless examples of political projects where any form of criticism is excluded. The authority of the ruler is then defined by referring to divine grace, to the will of the people, or to the right of the party and its ideology. Even post-modern society which elsewhere shows profound skepticism about the very possibility of constructing social history, does not escape such centralizing structures, but now the market and its logic are given the monopoly of imagination in political and social matters.

The question of power is worth studying in this shift from modern to post-modern society. A shift is observable from structural power represented by political and social institutions, to what could be defined as ideological power, although very different from the time of the great political ideologies of modernism. The kind of ideological power that reigns in post-modernity may be described as the power of definition, or power to set the agenda. It is the power to decide what is in and what is out, what is relevant and what is not. It is also the power to decide who should be heard and who should be silenced, to determine what is possible and what is not even worth attempting. Such power has heavy ideological weight since it presupposes standardized ideas concerning the human being (focusing on individualism) and society (focusing on new-liberal consumerism.)

Thus post-modern ideology also exercises a «monopoly of imagination» in a way that excludes different approaches to social life. Exclusion may take many forms, from political oppression, via economic and social marginalization, to

19 «Transformation is at the very root of our Christian faith. It is at the heart of the saving, redeeming and sanctifying acts of God.» Melancthon, Monica J., in *Koinonia and Mission*, a lecture given at the Lutheran World Federation Consultation on Churches in Mission, Nairobi, October 1998.

indifferent ignorance. This is not the point to go further into that issue, but we are close to a burning question for postmodern society, if we still want to be democratic and inclusive.

The question is whether these observations also have any relevance for the study of the Church and its way of being a social structure. It is evident that the biblical material reports on tensions between centre and periphery. The classical example in the Old Testament is the conflict between city and countryside, between kingdom and tribal system. In the New Testament we see a similar tension between Jerusalem and Galilee, between the keepers of tradition and their centralized structures of power on the one side, and popular belief on the other. What later happened to the Christian Church is known to all of us. Its centralized and monopolized power was given dominance and placed beyond question when Constantine gave the ancient roles of *sacerdotium* and *pontifex* to the hierarchy of the Church.

One important aspect of this development is the fact that the diaconate lost its position in the Church. It became a stepping-off point for those who were selected for an ecclesiastical career. It should also be noted that this happened at the time when those who were concerned with the radical dimension of the Christian message withdrew from the centre and found new ways of living the faith at the periphery. The monastic life presented itself both as a protest against the current tendencies in the central Church, but also as a positive way of serving the Lord and of assisting the sick and poor.

If it were possible to identify this concern with a specific way of being Church that is rooted in the life of Jesus Christ and the mission given to his followers, it may be that a specific concept should be reserved for it. Within the Lutheran tradition, the word *diakonia* expresses this concern in a meaningful way. It is above all an ecclesiological term to focus the importance of the periphery within God's mission in Christ, and how this is reflected in the mandate given to the Church.

If the observations above are correct, something happened both to the diaconate and to *diakonia* as the Church developed her centralistic structure. This indicates that there may be a relationship between the historical diaconate and what we have designated here as *diakonia*. It also opens up an understanding of the diaconate as a ministry of prophecy and transformation, and as a possibility for renewal in the Church and its way of being incarnated in our time.

Periphery and centre

The question then is whether this tendency to structure institutions in a way that furthers centralization and monopoly should be seen only in sociological terms, or whether this also is a matter of theology.

The conflicts between periphery and centre described in the Bible indicate that there exists a continuous tension that is vital for the identity of the people of God and their constant need of renewal. In the Old Testament this tension is

represented on the one hand by the tradition of the Exodus and its liberating action and, on the other hand by Sinai and the covenant's regulation of law and order. It is important to see that both sides are regarded as necessary for the welfare of the people of God. It belongs to the eschatological nature of Israel, and later of the Church to find a sound relationship between breaking up and maintaining tradition, between prophetic protest and religious establishment, between evangelical liberty and dogmatic tradition.

Ecclesiology should be concerned with both sides. There is no Exodus without Sinai, and no Sinai without Exodus. Therefore the Church must respect the tension between prophetic charism and power. The power centre should not criminalize the first and monopolize the last. Nor should the periphery declare infallible the first and combat the last (Merton 1957:157). As there is always a tendency to give central power more weight, it should be remembered that Scripture normally gives priority to the periphery: Exodus comes before Sinai; the prophetic protest is given more attention than the established answer.

Periphery should not only be seen as a context of social and political oppression, but as *locus theologicus* in the sense that here is basic human experience, and even more, the periphery is a centre of God's active love. The book of Job illustrates this in a very convincing way and expresses the clamor to God of the tormented, which cries for justice and salvation. In Job's dialogue with the orthodox theologians they present correct teaching on justice, sin and mercy. The victimized on the other hand, cannot see that such answers are sustainable in his experience of being consigned to the outermost periphery of human existence. In the end, Job's right to protest is proven not as a new way of formulating theological dogma, but as the freedom to cry out against established reason in the same way the enslaved people in Egypt did, and where action and answer depend solely on God and his salvation.

The mission of Jesus may also be read as incarnation at the human periphery. «Can anything good come from Nazareth?» asked Nathanael, in the name of all those who invest faith and hope in central power. Criticism arose later, when Jesus chose the periphery as the arena of his proclamation and liberating action. When the disciples longed for powerful position, he warned them against the power of those leaders that have «complete authority». «Anyone who wants to be great among you, must be your servant.» This passage (Mark 10:35–45) has both a strong Christological and ecclesiological focus. Thus is underlined the exclusivity of Jesus' Messianic mission as *diakonia* («to give his life to redeem many») and at the same time the continuity between his *diakonia* and the *diakonia* of his disciples («the way it is among you»).

As we know, it has not been easy for the Church to measure up to this vocation. Roman Catholic scholars such as Yves Congar have criticized what he calls the «hierachological» structure of the Church. In his opinion christomonism is responsible for the Church's traditional pyramidal structure (Congar 1969).²⁰ Within this concept, Christ and Church are regarded as almost identical - «the one who sees the Church, sees Christ, because the Church is Christ himself» as is

stated in the papal encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi* (1943). When the Church is identified with the visible church structure, ecclesial power becomes absolute and criticism may be classified as disobedience against divine order.

Against this «christomonism» Catholic theologians like Yves Congar (Congar 1970:41f) and Leonardo Boff have referred to the pneumatological element of ecclesiology in order to create a balance between charism and power in the Church.²¹ The Church is at the same time mediator of a unique tradition, present in the apostolic witness, and an eschatological «now» (*kairos*) created by the Spirit.

This corresponds to the expression of the Lutheran tradition that the Spirit works «*ubi et quando visum est Deo*» (*Confessio Augustana* V). The fact that the Reformers strongly questioned centralized ecclesiastical power did not however, necessarily result in alternative church structures with more space for the lowly. So far the churches of the Reformation are in the same need of reformulating their relation to the periphery and of establishing a ministry of prophecy and transformation.

Power to serve

The attempt to balance charism and power in the Church by referring to the pneumatological and Christological moments in ecclesiology as Boff does, is not quite convincing as it identifies Christ with ecclesial power in a way that is questionable. The point at issue is not so much the question of balance, but how to understand power, especially when the New Testament deals with power in Christological and ecclesiological terms.

The evangelists recount that Jesus demonstrated power (*exousia*) «not as the scribes» (Matthew 7:29). The Synoptics use this term in situations where Jesus reveals the qualities of the Kingdom. This is done in word and deed, and the crowd was amazed observing this authority: «his fame spread everywhere» (Mark 1:27f).

Not only was the imposing effect of his power amazing, even more astounding was the way in which it was used. The sick were healed, excluded groups were given access to his table, and women and children were admitted to his fellowship. It is possible to interpret all this as manifestations of his rule of inversion, in which «whoever would be great among you must be your servant.» As referred to above, this rule relates closely to the tradition of Jesus the Servant: «For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many» (Mark 10:45). According to the findings of John Collins, service should not pri-

20 This is also one of the main concerns of Leonardo Boff in his controversial book *Church: Charism and Power. Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church* (Boff 1985. See also Nordstokke 1996:195f).

21 «An alternative structure; Charism as the organizing principle», in Boff 1985:154–164.

marily be interpreted as self-humiliation and servility, but as conscious mission with divine authority and with the mandate to be a go-between in contexts of conflict and suffering (Collins 1990). In other words, where the periphery has deprived people of all dignity and hope, where their belonging to the community is being denied, the authority of Jesus is manifested as a power to invert values and relations. It is prophetic in the sense that the periphery is defended and promised divine care and mercy. It is messianic in the sense that it represents the coming of a new age and the qualities of the Kingdom that is being proclaimed.

This is how his authority differs, not only from that of the scribes, but also from «the rulers of this age.» Their authority envisages submission, distance and silence. The authority Jesus is recognized by the opposite: it lifts up, it includes and it empowers. This is done through his service, his messianic coming, his human figure, his word and deed, his solidarity with the most marginalized experience, his suffering and death. Several indications in the New Testament present his mission as messianic service (e.g. Luke 22:2.7; John 6:4 and 13:1ff).

The authority of Jesus became a threat to the religious and political institutions of his time (Matthew 21:23). Their position presupposed the power to exclude, and they possessed means of sanction that also enabled them to get rid of Jesus as representative of an inclusive, liberating and empowering authority given by God. Easter is the dramatic climax in the conflict between two opposing visions of divine authority. The one expresses its position through the words of the high priest: «it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people» (John 11:50), thus accepting torture and death in order to maintain the *status quo*. The other is willing to go the way of passion, so that new life may grow forth. «Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit» (John 12:24). Thus the power of the *status quo* is revealed as the logic of death, while the power of transformation is the logic of life.

In the authority of Jesus, is seen a paradoxical simultaneity of power and powerlessness. Paul affirms in his letter to the Colossians that Jesus has «disarmed the principalities and powers» (2:15), but he also makes it clear that this happened at the cross, the exact place of defeat and powerlessness. It seems reasonable to interpret simultaneity as central to the very nature of Jesus' mission, as an expression of his *diakonia*. It should be noticed that service is not seen as passive delivery to the will of others. Service is a conscious option and powerful action, even in moments of humility. It could be that the Greek verb *tapeinein* has been too easily interpreted in individual and moral terms - to humble oneself. It can also be translated «to be among the small», as an act of conscious solidarity and willingness to abandon positions of privilege. This is the context of Philippians 2:8, where the messianic service of Jesus is praised. At the same time it is presented as a model for the Church and its way of being (vv 1-5).

Diakonia as power to serve

It is evident in the New Testament that the Church is called to serve, following the example of Jesus and with the same kind of authority that he had been given. «And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every infirmity» (Matthew 10:1). This mandate was given a new authority after the resurrection (Matthew 28:18).

It is impossible to see the calling of the disciples without their empowerment to serve in the same way that Jesus had done. This is the reason for the use of the concept *diakonia* when the New Testament refers to leadership and vital concerns within the community. Thus it expresses continuity with the *diakonia* of Jesus, and at the same time it acts as a reminder of the kind of values that must belong to very nature of the Church as body of Christ. An interesting example of this is found in Paul's arguments in favor of the collection (*diakonia*) in 2 Corinthians 8–9. The collection in favor of the poor in Jerusalem is simply called «the *diakonia*» (8:4, 9:1). Its motivation is found in God's gracious action, above all in the example of Jesus (8:9), and the final goal of this *diakonia* is the glory of God and the communion where everybody is included (9:13).

Acts 6:1–7 illustrates how the church leadership responds according to its diaconal identity when being challenged by the periphery. Greek-speaking widows experienced a kind of marginalization at the daily distribution of food (or funds), in contradiction with the community of the table and its inclusive character. After finding out what really was happening, the apostles proposed a reorganization of the community. New leaders were appointed. Their Greek names indicate that they represented the group that had been marginalized. Thus the apostles manifested a kind of leadership that gave authority to the periphery, and we see that this change mobilized the church: it «grew larger and larger» (v. 7).

It is not conformity to the standards of this world, but transformation according to the new age brought by Christ and the example given by the incarnate Lord, that is the kind of service to which the Church is called (Romans 12:1–2). *Diakonia* could thus be understood as the way of being that also acts concretely, giving space to the marginalized. The diaconate would then be the ministry with a specific task to see that this really happens. Thus it would have to be a ministry of advocacy and prophecy, of speaking in favor of the poor and the silenced, just as the prophets did in biblical times. It would also be a ministry of transformation, in the sense that the deacon would be a church leader especially engaged in empowering and animating those at the periphery to active participation in the life of faith, hope and love.

The key question is whether this image of the diaconate can be identified with what deacons are understood to be and what they actually do in our churches. On the one hand, there are clear indications that go in this direction. When deacons are ordained in the Church of Sweden they are asked by the bishop: «Will you hold fast to the faith of the church, help those who are in need of your service and

take sides with the oppressed?» (Borgegård & Hall 1999:127). Concrete action and advocacy belong to the image of the deacon, and as the bishop's question is formulated, this is related to the faith of the church. It should therefore be no surprise that many deacons in the Nordic Churches are active in the periphery of society, even if their voices are not so often heard either in the church or in the public sphere.

It is complicated in our context on the other hand to develop an image of a church minister who acts prophetically in a convincing way. Because of centuries of history characterized by a close alliance between throne and altar, the ordained ministry is profoundly marked by its loyalty to worldly authorities. Are there models of powerful church ministry that could differ from what has been experienced in European church history? Is the only alternative a humble and self-effacing «Church for others» as was formulated in the ecumenical language of the 1960s? Or is it possible to imagine a self-confident Church with a mission incarnated at the margin of human existence? These are partly unanswered challenges to *diakonia* as praxis and reflection in our time.

Above all else, this challenges the institutional Church's traditional alliance with the dominant classes. Although the aristocratic features have sometimes been toned down during recent decades, the Church still reflects the life-style and the interests of the middle and higher classes of society. In some cases, but not too often, the periphery has challenged the churches to act, but traditional charity work has seldom questioned the monopoly of the center. Its dominant position normally gives those who are at the periphery only the role of being objects and passive receivers, with the understanding that they should conform to the center, its worldview and values.

Consequently, conformity and conservatism dominate in the churches. Change is limited to the personal level, and often as an acceptance of the traditional worldview and value systems. It seems difficult to find models that could liberate the Church organism into being an agent of transformation. Could *diakonia* and the ministry of the diaconate be the instrument for changing this situation?

To put this in very general terms, in the last 1500 years the Church has placed nearly all its emphasis on its institutional center, and we have started to become more and more aware of the negative consequences of this imbalance as we have been crossing the threshold of a new millennium. The challenge for the church now is to de-centralize, to give the periphery a new importance, remembering the biblical witness in favor of the poor, the oppressed and the excluded, and being especially mindful of how Jesus related to these groups.

In practical terms, that would imply a new sensitivity in the Church to situations of exclusion. In the global context, two-thirds of the world's population is considered expendable according to the logic of neo-liberal society. In the local context, post-modern individualism and political fatigue justify new mechanisms of exclusion. Perhaps impulses from the periphery, from poor churches in the South, can help our churches respond to these challenges.

A Brazilian theologian, Rodolfo Gaede Neto, has defended a thesis related to the understanding of *diakonia* in the context of Latin America (Gaede Neto 1999). He starts with diaconal praxis as experienced in his Brazilian church and describes it as practical, prophetic and community-orientated.²² His analysis of biblical texts affirms that the *diakonia* of Jesus had the same features, with the rule of inversion as the most challenging mark.

If Rodolfo Gaede Neto is correct in his observation, the diaconal praxis of the Church is an expression of her prophetic mandate. The practical nature of this praxis makes it go beyond words and opinions. Within Lutheran tradition there has been a tendency to relate *diakonia* to ethics or ethical consciousness, either at a personal level as in the pietistic tradition, or on a more political level, as in modern theology. Either way, this position risks being one-sided. Against this view must be held the practical nature of *diakonia*, which means conscious action with the aim of transforming reality, motivated by Christian hope and modeled by the example of Jesus the Servant. As such, this praxis is clearly based on the faith, hope and love of the Christian community, and with the aim of edifying the Church.

The prophetic nature is proven above all in the commitment to the periphery. Its aim is not to be a Church for the poor, but much more a Church with the poor, or even a Church of the poor. For that purpose, prophetic *diakonia* seeks to promote a praxis that opens space to the periphery, dignifies the expendable and empowers the excluded.

In the Brazilian context it is obvious who the poor are, both because of their number and the visible misery in which they are condemned to live. Poverty is more hidden in our affluent society. Some would even like to think that poverty has finally been eradicated with the establishment of the modern welfare state. Reality shows however, that poverty and misery have many faces, many of them masked and therefore not easy to see. Not only is new poverty growing in most European countries, but we are also experiencing situations of silencing and exclusion by which considerable groups of people are being placed at the periphery of society. The long-time jobless, the school dropouts, persons with chronic health problems, the disabled and other groups risk being considered expendable according to the ideology of post-modern society.

The effort to defend the dignity and rights of the excluded must therefore have roots in the socio-economic-political reality of our time. Only then can ministry be prophetic and challenging. Care must therefore be taken that this task is not being reduced to the spiritual sphere. The commitment to the poor does not mean that the rich are excluded from the sphere of diaconal action. Here also, the rule that periphery and center are interrelated counts, but without ignoring the difference between them. However, as was the case with the *diakonia* of Jesus, those in most need of healing met the Healer first (Matthew 9:11).

22 Gaede Neto describes three dimensions of *diakonia*, «*a dimensão prática*», «*a dimensão profética*», and «*a dimensão comunitária*».

Such practice may be resisted, both in Church and society. Its authority may be questioned. Consequently, it is of fundamental importance how this diaconal authority is founded and what kind of legitimacy it is given. If it is only founded in social theory, it will easily be judged as secondary to theological authority. This makes it vital to root diaconal praxis and its authority in the identity and fundamental mandate of the Church. The diaconate can be seen as a visible way of rooting this authority in the ministry of the Church. According to this way of thinking, if the diaconate is vital for the Church and its mandate of advocacy, healing and transformation, then this ministry places such responsibility in the centre of the Church structure and thus links it to the authority of the Church.

In this way, two equal movements within the Church can be seen. The first relates to the de-centralization of church power, locating it at the periphery. The second relates to the representation of the periphery at the church center. In both these movements the diaconate as a ministry of prophecy and transformation has an important role. In theory this may appear logical. However, the reality is quite different. As quoted above, «every institution attempts to monopolize imagination in the interest of order.» Such self-regulation is also experienced in the Church, and in the end only the life-giving Spirit gives a steadfast hope that transformation is possible.

The ministry of service

If this paper has not yet dealt with the diaconate as ministry in practical terms, it has consciously aimed at this topic and tried to give it a convincing basis for concrete action. The first thing to be noticed is that there is surprising continuity between this understanding of the diaconate and its actual role in the first centuries. According to the written sources from that time, the deacon was the «ear» of the bishop, responsible for bringing to the center of the Church whatever was happening among the members, especially those who were sick or in other form of need. This sensitivity to the needs of people and the access to the bishop were closely linked to the administrative responsibility of the deacon. All this gave him an authority that was soon questioned, especially by the priests. Although cases of abuse of diaconal power are reported from that period one of the reasons for the degradation of blame also lies with the development of institutionalization, centralization and the introduction of a hierarchic structure.

The same elements that we register in the model of the early Church are also relevant for today's diaconate. The ability to sense the experience of the periphery presupposes a readiness to be present among the excluded, to taste their powerlessness, to listen to their stories as versions of describing reality and also to share their visions of what the future could be like. This ability can be natural and it can be fortified by diaconal spirituality, but it should also be trained professionally, in the sense that the deacon is able to analyze what is seen, and to formulate with

others proposals for action, even if choices in some situations are difficult and may be conflicting.

Secondly, ordination is important, not only as a sign of access to the bishop, but also as an expression of being part of the leadership of the Church, with the kind of authority thereby implied. This gives the deacon the possibility of linking the periphery with the center, of inverting the scale of urgency and of dignity within the Church. Ordination also gives the deacon a liturgical role and the authority to bring the clamor into the room of prayer and celebration. The role as go-between is relevant in many contexts, not only in the socio-political and cultural arena, but also in the ecclesial and liturgical context.

Thirdly, the administrative function gives the deacon opportunities to practice the role of advocacy and transformation. A variety of activities may be organized. The deacon should not be the only actor in this field. That would mean another deplorable monopoly. The role of the deacon is much more to animate, motivate, empower, mobilize and organize.

Within the understanding of the diversified ministry of the Church, these elements could give the office of deacon its *proprium*. Even if the diaconal mandate should never be reserved exclusively for this ministry, as it belongs to the ministry of all the baptized, it is the specific concern and commitment of the deacon. The professional requirement for ordination should take this into account, as should the way the deacon is deployed by the Church.

This understanding of the diaconate does not necessarily correspond to the Lutheran tradition of *diakonia*, though it could be seen as an interpretation of some of the development we have seen in the Nordic churches in the last few decades. On the other hand, it reflects recent experience in churches in Latin America, Africa and Asia. Here the concept of *diakonia* has been rediscovered as a meaningful term of expressing what Christians do, in a way that relates action to their identity as the body of Christ. From this perspective the ecumenical discussion on the ministry of the diaconate gains new relevance.

CHAPTER 8

THEOLOGY FROM THE SOUTH: IMPULSES FOR DIAKONIA AND THE EDUCATION OF DEACONS

Introductory remarks

In this opening paragraph I would like to define more precisely some key terms in the title.

The first is regarding «theology from the South». In this presentation I shall limit my focus to the Latin American theology of liberation which has been my field of study for many years. But there are also special reasons for linking this branch of theology from the South to the concept of diakonia because of its strong ecclesial features and concern for relevant pastoral action related to contemporary social and political issues.

Secondly, my understanding of diakonia depends largely on the Scandinavian model of congregational diakonia. Institutional diakonia is not completely disregarded in the following, but the main context for reflection on diakonia here is the Christian church at its local level.

Thirdly, when I refer to educating deacons, I have the Norwegian model in mind, where the students first complete a three-year study within the area of health or social work, and then take a fourth year concentrating on theological and diaconal issues.²³

23 Since 2005 this has changed. The Church of Norway now requires a master degree in diakonia in order to be employed as a deacon. The master study takes normally two years and is based on a bachelor degree in health or social studies. See also Vervik & Hakala 2011.

The birth of theology of liberation

The beginning of theology of liberation in Latin America reminds one of similar situations in other parts of the world, indicating that history contains parallel experiences and challenges. During the second part of the 19th century in Germany, the diaconal movement grew to be a strong manifestation of church-based social service, and it led to a rediscovery of diakonia as a new way of ecclesial action in European mainline Christianity. The reasons for this rediscovery were both theological and non-theological. In the non-theological, the growth of an industrialized society with all its negative consequences for the working class became a tremendous challenge to the church. Especially among Christians rooted in missionary movements, it became clear that the proclamation of the Good News would not sound convincing without a Christian concern for the social problems of the poor. There was however, not only a new awareness of a new social context, but the church itself was severely affected by this new situation. This was not only in a negative way, as large groups of the population were about to lose their contact with the church, but also in a positive manner, as this changing time with its breakdown of traditional hierarchical power structures opened a new mobilizing of the church. The result was new room given to the laity, to lay movements, and eventually for diakonia as concern and activity established work and even as new ministries in the church.

On the other hand, there was also a theological reflection that accompanied this renewal of the church. In Germany, the so-called fathers of modern diakonia from Fliedner and on, produced theological arguments in order to convince that this renewal had a solid biblical and historical-systematic-theological foundation. One may ask what came first, praxis or theology. Such a question may appear as idle as whether the hen or the egg came first. More importantly however, is the observation that there was a clear connection between the development of praxis and of theory, between the situation that challenged and asked for action, and the disciplined reflection on why and how such action should be understood.

This parenthesis with its reference to the situation in Northern Europe 150 years ago, indicates in my opinion, a striking parallel to the situation in Latin America in the late 1960s, when the theology of liberation first was presented as a new way of doing theology. At that time there was also a growing awareness of a changing society. At the important meeting of Catholic bishops in Medellín in Columbia in 1968, the theme was «The Church in the present-day transformation of Latin America in the light of the council» (CELAM 1968). The documents from that conference show an unprecedented openness towards the brutal reality of the Latin American society. While the church had earlier defended this society for its fundamental loyalty to Catholic virtues, it now spoke openly about the oppression and injustice that victimized the majority of the continent's population. This new way of analyzing the socio-political reality opened a rather revolutionary quest for a new society, in itself quite unbelievable if you take into consideration the church's role in Latin America from the time of conquest and colo-

nization. That history was now given a self-critical review with a pledge to renew the church according to the challenges of the conflict-ridden society. In the document from the Medellín conference, basic Christian communities are referred to as an answer to this challenge, and in the years which followed, the experiences from that particular new way of being church turned out to be the most prominent sign of renewal.

Basic Christian communities and the theology of liberation should be considered as two sides of the same coin. Together they brought forth a renewal of a church that most observers as late as in the 1950's had considered a hindrance to a real change of the Latin American society. Instead of being a hindrance, that very same church now took upon itself to be a driving force for transformation through its defence of human rights, as well as its commitment for justice and peace, and above all for the poor's right to share and participate in the shaping of a new society.

The question now is, can these experiences, as well as the theological reflection that accompany them, stimulate us as educators within the area of diakonia in our commitment to solid and relevant study programs? During the last few years we have seen a changing Europe where hope in many cases has been replaced by fear. There is uncertainty as to how the church and its diakonia can meet post-cold war and postmodern society. As was the case in Germany in the middle of the 19th century, and also in Latin America in the late 1960's, the question of renewal implies both praxis and theory. In the following, I shall therefore try to identify some impulses that the theology of liberation may present in today's European context.

Theology of liberation as diaconal theology

The term «diakonia» is not often found in publications by Latin American theologians, and the idea of presenting the theology of liberation as a diaconal theology may appear strange. However, its two fundamental points of departure are very close to what, in our context has been designated as being at the very core of diakonia. One of them is the shivering experience of the misery and suffering of the Latin American people, and with this, the conviction that this scandalous situation cannot continue. Fundamental change is necessary, as the analysis of the present society reveals the root causes of the misery, and it becomes clear that cosmetic reforms are not sufficient. The other is a clamour of despair to God for mercy and justice in such an inhuman world. The clamour is, on the one hand, carried by an ethical indignation related to what is seen in the form of a desperate cry: Do you not see, O Lord? And on the other hand, even in the midst of despair, there is a faith in God as the defender and helper of the poor. This faith is based on what the Bible testifies about God as the one who listens to the people's clamour and who comes to rescue and liberate. The story of Exodus and the pro-

clamation of the cross of Jesus as life's victory over death are the focused points of this testimony.

This point of departure and the recognition that the majority of Latin Americans are poor *and* believers, gives the theology of liberation some qualities that may be considered as vital impulses for diaconal praxis and reflection, also in our context.

The first is its rootedness in *praxis*, i.e. the conflict-ridden reality as it above all is experienced by the poor. Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez defines theology as «critical reflection on praxis» (Gutiérrez 1971). This means that praxis is the first act while the theological reflection is second act where experiences and especially conflicts are critically interpreted and judged in light of God's word and the Christian tradition. But it also means a breach with any theology that claims to be universal and a consequence of eternal principles and dogmas. The theology of liberation is not only conscious about being contextual; it stresses contextuality and gives priority to the inductive method of reflection in the relation between praxis and theory.

The method «see - judge - act» is often used when relating theoretical reflection to socio-political analysis. This means firstly that it is necessary to *see* (or to analyze reality in its complex socio-political-economical-cultural context) before embarking upon theological interpretation. But it also means that the judgement is interesting only if it leads to action with the purpose of changing the scandalous conditions of life of the poor. Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff says, related to this point of view, that the aim and objective is liberation, and not the theology of liberation in itself (Boff 1976:54). Correct action (*ortopraxis*) has priority over correct teaching (*ortodoxy*).

The second axis of the theology of liberation that makes it interesting to diaconal praxis and reflection is its ecclesial character, which means its constant reference to the church as fellowship. In the Latin American context this reference links to the basic Christian communities that may be described as a new way of being a church with equality and participation as marks of identity. The basic Christian communities reflect the poor's way of being church which corresponds to the notion that the majority of Latin Americans are poor *and* believers. In the basic Christian communities the poor have a new role. They are no longer passive spectators at the periphery of the church, but active subjects, who with the Bible in their hands, see, judge and act in order to change their own situation and build a more just and human society.

In this way, the poor are made aware of their own dignity. They are not poor (*pobres*) because they are lazy, ignorant or because God want them to be poor, but they have been made poor (*empobrecidos*) through centuries of oppression and exploration.

This attention given to the poor however, is not only due to socio-political analysis. It has also to do with a predominant tone in all Catholic spirituality. Poverty is not only a virtue. From the very early history of the church the poor have been looked upon as carrying the presence of Christ in a mysterious manner.

Within the theology of liberation this spirituality is placed in a socio-political context, which makes Leonardo Boff develop a spirituality of liberation with political saints. An example of this is Archbishop Romero from El Salvador who was murdered because of his bold defense of the poor.

For Leonardo Boff this goes beyond rhetoric. Summoned to the Vatican in 1984 by Cardinal Ratzinger, the then Prefect of the powerful Congregation of the Faith, Boff courageously asked for a change of date. The reason for his petition was his commitment as speaker at a church meeting for prostitutes in Salvador, Brazil on the day that the cardinal had proposed to meet with him. His argument was: The poor are the first aim of the Kingdom and they are also our eschatological judges. According to the Lord's word, prostitutes that listen to the Word and believe, shall enter the Kingdom before all the rest of us (Matthew 21:31). Neither the Pharisees, nor the teachers of the law that sit in Moses' seat, are the ones that are called to judge the praxis of the church, but instead it is the world's most miserable.

It is this reference to praxis and to the church as community that makes it natural to see the theology of liberation as a diaconal theology. European scholars have described the theology of liberation as political theology, as radical social ethics or as a contextual pastoral theology. In my opinion, all these descriptions are too narrow. If one single focusing characteristic should be given in order to open a dialogue with European theology and church life, the diaconal feature remains - as I see it - the most convincing.

A servant Church

In its first phase, the theology of liberation expressed a rather strong scepticism as to the role of the church in the struggle for changing Latin American society. The reason for this attitude was the church's traditional alliance with the dominant class and its religious sanction of oppression in exchange for religious privileges.

Only through the growth of tens of thousands of basic Christian communities, the church was re-discovered as *locus* of what the poor dreamed of and would fight for. The condition, however, was that the church was willing to change its social *locus*, from the inner circles of power to the periphery where everyday life is marked by the struggle of survival. Such relocating requires profound changes in the life of the church. Not only must new structures be developed, but also attitudes, behaviour and patterns of action must be developed when moving from the former position of powerful institution to the new of serving the poor.

That the church is called to serve is fundamental in the theology of liberation. As already stated above, only seldomly is the term «diakonia» used. There may be various reasons for this; one is its absence in traditional Catholic terminology in Latin America. Deacon was used as the title of ministry before being ordained as a priest, but it was not related to diakonia as church-related social action.

When the theologians of liberation speak about the church, their interest is not primarily its internal structure. Consequently, not much attention is given to the diaconate as ministry, nor to deacons as a special group within the clergy. Their concern is primarily how the church can become a church of the poor, and how the church as community can be serious about injustice and oppression. Out of this engagement, questions emerge regarding church structures. In the basic Christian communities a variety of new ministries were developed; ministries not understood as reserved for a small elite with the consequence that some few are doers while the others are spectators, but rather ministries as concrete tasks that everyone in the communion will hold for a period of time.

From the perspective of the theology of liberation, the most correct assertion would be to see the whole church as called to be diaconal. This position can be illustrated by statements of Leonardo Boff, as he defends the right of the basic Christian communities to call themselves churches, while at the same time he calls to account what he denominates pathological features of the institutional church. In a book published in Brazil in 1978, one of its chapters is given the title: «The church, a network of services and its concrete universality» (Boff 1989). Here he challenges the institutional church (not the basic Christian communities that otherwise are his subject) to take upon itself the form of a servant and exercise political diakonia in defense of the weak and oppressed. Due to the strong social and political position of the institutional church, it is possible for its leadership in certain situations to say, «Enough is enough, now injustice has become unbearable!» Thus, the church is challenged publicly to denounce any attempt to sacralise the play of the powerful of this world, and at the same time announce another dimension of life and history.

In another book the mission of the church in Latin America is presented as that of the Good Samaritan (Boff 1988). Mission is seen from the perspective of the half dead victim. To be a neighbour means to defend the last moment of life, to defend the rights of the poor and recreate the church as God's people among the poor. Boff calls this «samaritanian diakonia», and to many poor this is the only defence they know.

The Central American theologian Victório Araya Guillén makes a similar reference to this story and concludes that the challenge is not to *be* somebody's neighbour, but in praxis *show* how to be one (Araya Guillén 1987). When the conflict-ridden reality becomes a dramatic struggle of life and death, diakonia means to be on life's side in obedience to the God of Life.

The poor as centre for diakonia

Can we in Europe talk about the poor in the same way as the theologians of liberation do in Latin America? A few years ago this question was far less relevant than it seems to be now in a changing Europe when new groups of poor seem to be emerging.

Even in Norway, where we for so long have celebrated the blessings of the social democratic welfare state, poverty again is on the agenda. It has become common to talk about the «two-thirds society» where a considerable group of one-parent-families, unemployed, disabled of different categories, immigrants, drug addicts and others have to struggle to not become the permanent losers in society.

There are clear differences in Europe compared with the poor in Latin America where the poor are an 80% majority in most societies. Another characteristic is that many of them are politically active, aware of their rights and ready to fight for them. In our society, the poor are often silent and unorganized. They are found in statistics and in TV-reports, but they are seldom seen in the political arena. If they should appear there, they may be perceived as threats, more than a person with a human face.

Unlike Latin America, the poor are seldom seen in the church in our context. With few exceptions they do not conceive of the church as their *locus* where their cause may be defended. Can that be a reason why their cry for justice often has no echo in the daily life of the church?

How much do we actually know about the faith of the poor in our midst? Is their faith being disqualified because it is so seldom expressed in the ordinary life of our congregations? It can well be that our churches, and especially our diakonia, should learn from the theologians of liberation when defending the poor and their faith within the church, a faith that is expressed through traditional piety, through prayer and singing, but above all through a new way of reading the Bible. A primary task here is to lift up biblical texts that announce God's care for the poor and their privileged position in his action for salvation. This message contradicts experiences of marginalization, and it fosters faith, hope and love.

Here again we sense some problems within our European context. We may also read about the privileged role of the poor in the Bible, especially in the stories of Jesus. But because the poor are not that visible in our context, and because we, have a long tradition of spiritualizing the term «the poor» in a manner that depicts them as the pious humble, those texts lose a lot of the radical sting they have in Latin America. We should critically ask ourselves if we do justice to the term «the poor» as it is used in the Bible. If we understand it in a way where nearly everybody is said to be poor, we may ignore social and political conditions that result in poverty in our own countries. The same may happen if we reduce the understanding of the term to the religious sphere, saying that the true poverty is the «spiritual» having to do with our relationship to God. Both these interpretations disconnect the understanding of the «poor» from economic and social reality, with the result that the promises of the Bible are stolen from those to whom they are primarily addressed.

In the Christian communities of the first century, the *locus* in which the New Testament was written, there probably were no differences between «the poor» and «the people of faith». This was not because the term «the poor» already had been spiritualized, but due to the fact that the community mainly consisted of poor and marginalized. The organizing of diakonia as presented in Acts 6 shows

that the poverty within the community was a constant challenge, both socially *and* theologically.

In contradiction to both early Christian communities and the Latin American basic Christian communities, only few real poor participate in our standard church life. Our communities are more often marked by the middle class way of life. If we are able to identify the poor as a social group, this is normally to be found *outside* the Christian community. Are these poor the ones that Jesus addresses in the Beatitudes? Are they in a special way the goal of God's concern and love? What kind of consequences will these questions have for the self-understanding of the congregation of believers? Can it any longer claim to be a Christian community if it has no room for the poor and does not live the kind of discipleship that in the Sermon on the Mount is described as a consequence of the Beatitudes?

These questions may be discussed theologically, and certainly theologians are able to elaborate dogmatic deliberations that may respond to needs of teaching and preaching in the church. But diakonia should go beyond such answers, as diakonia according to its own nature, contains a constant impulse towards change. This change comes first of all in the context of the church so that it may be renewed for serving those addressed by the promises of the Gospel, and secondly in the context of the world that tends to steal away and suffocate the life and hope of the poor.

How can this happen? We are accustomed to imagining diaconal action as a movement from the centre towards the periphery, in an action to save the poor from their misery and rescuing them into our well-established room. Within this model of action, our room is regarded as a goal or solution. If it then happens that the poor resist and decline our option for them, it may be due to the culture and lifestyle of our room, and inbuilt attitudes that more or less openly blame the poor for being poor. In this kind of conflict the theologians of liberation understand that their task is to struggle for the culture and way of life of the poor, not only to be permitted space in the church, but as an option for the whole church. That means that the poor are empowered to be agents of renewal, both in church and society.

This links to the traditional role of advocacy that has always accompanied diakonia. The defence of the weak is not primarily to be motivated in the mercy of the strong, but in the dignity of the marginalized and suffering that diakonia has a holy pledge towards. This pledge is clearly stated in the document of the Church of Sweden concerning the ordination of deacons: «The deacon shall defend people's rights, be on the side of the oppressed, and liberate the people of God to do what is good, so that God's love may become visible in the world».

It is clearly stated here that this task does not only belong to the deacon, but to the whole of God's people that shall be liberated to do good. This can only happen if the church as a whole becomes diaconal. The diaconate's role is to visualize this convocation to service, through demonstrating an example, through education and inspiration, but also through organizing concrete diaconal action.

In this perspective, the objective of diakonia is not primarily to evangelize the poor, but to empower the poor and their mission to evangelize the established community, especially if the community has forgotten the fundamental understanding of the Gospel as good news to the poor. The dearest task of diakonia is exactly this: to defend the rights of poor, and their full participation both in the church and society. In the end, this perspective also legitimizes the liturgical functions of deacons in a decisive way. In the liturgy, the deacon represents the poorest at the altar, and at the same time is a constant reminder for the whole of the congregation of God's preferential love for the poor.

The necessity of interdisciplinary competence

In our tradition, the training of deacons has included both theological formation and education in health and social care. This so-called «double qualification» has been considered necessary when working with the sick and poor, and in being a bridge builder between church and society. Today's interdisciplinary competence is considered a special strength in the performance of professional diaconal work.

This understanding of diaconal professionalism is in fact, in accordance with theology of liberation that stresses the connection between socio-political analysis, interpretation and action. It is not possible to give a full-fledged presentation of this position here. I shall just point to the well-known method «see - judge - act,» and indicate how this is relevant in the education of deacons.

First of all it states that it is necessary to *see* reality with the help of sciences that specialize in analyzing society. When committed to processes in order to change the life of marginalized and poor people, the root causes for such injustice must be identified and studied with the help of relevant disciplines. Social sciences help us understand how mechanisms of exclusion work, and provide insight when elaborating methods that foster empowerment and participation. This is clearly in line with our tradition of interdisciplinary training of deacons.

Secondly, the reality as seen by social sciences must be *judged* in the light of God's word. As faith-based action, diakonia interprets reality in the perspective of what the church confesses and hopes for. This gives a particular perspective on history as the arena of God's action of liberation and salvation.

Thirdly, with seeing and judging come resources for renewed *action*. Without action, insight becomes a distant observation and interpretation of empty words. Diakonia, qualified through interdisciplinary competence, links its action to what it sees and judges in a way that checks whether new objectives should be formulated, new methods employed, new language developed, and new partner relationships established.

The mystics of service

Continuing what already has been stated about the poor as resources or agents in processes of social change, some words must be added concerning their spiritual gifts and their role as agents for renewing the spiritual life of the whole church. The theologians of liberation claim that the poor do not belong to a spiritual periphery, but that they in fact represent a powerful spiritual centre. This is due to their recognition of their own vulnerability and confidence in God's merciful rescue from all evil.

Understanding the poor as spiritual resources is grounded in biblical texts, as in Matthew 25 where the mysterious presence of Christ in the needy and oppressed is pictured. But it is important to underline that this presence is mysterious. It should not be rationalized in a way that claims qualities or merits of the poor because of their poverty. It is by God's grace that the poor are gifted with spiritual resources, as we all are. It should also be remembered that these gifts are not visible in a way that everyone sees the presence of God among the poor. Quite to the contrary, human senses normally only register poverty as disgusting and God-forgotten.

The mystics of service challenges diakonia to not be performed as a one-way movement of giving to the needy, but to be a two-way movement of sharing. It also becomes a movement of being nurtured in one's own faith, hope and love when meeting with marginalized and oppressed people. Diaconal action may bring such meeting experiences to the whole community, allowing the faith of the poor to be expressed in the liturgy, for instance.

Concrete steps towards a new diaconal praxis

Impulses from the Latin American theology of liberation should not necessarily be perceived as contradicting the variety of practices in which diakonia is involved in our part of the world. On the contrary, these impulses can strengthen and renew important work already being done. Following are some focal points where this may be particularly relevant:

a. **A conscious awareness of processes of change.** Diakonia is about change as it seeks concrete ways out of hopelessness, oppression and need. In diaconal training, students learn methods they can use in order to intervene in situations of suffering or injustice, and contribute to processes that will result in changes. This is the case when people who have lost a dear one are helped out of isolation by being introduced to a group of persons with similar experiences or destructive behaviour is overcome by building new networks and involvement in new forms of volunteer social activity. The aim is always some form of change, even in cases where permanent losses or limitations must be accepted, but where people learn to live with their new situation as reconciled and empowered persons. As ecclesial

praxis, diakonia is carried by a strong faith in the God of life who by grace transforms human reality. It is therefore a great challenge for diakonia to consequently maintain the perspective of change, and thus open this perspective in the totality of human existence, and not only reserve it for some sectors of treatment or within the realm of religious faith. God's renewing power that diakonia pursues to confess in praxis, concerns all spheres of life, including the social, economic and cultural (cf. Isaiah 43:19).

b. Providing space for the silenced. Diakonia cannot be reduced to doing something *for* the weak and marginalized. Nor is it to do something *with* them. Instead it is to do something *from* their perspective, having their situation and experiences in mind. The very first task is to grant them space. Evidently this does not only mean physical space within the community, but space for their stories of life and faith, and their version of reality. The churches in the South often refer to the task of «empowering the poor.» This implies defending their right to speak for themselves, and is also a protest against the worthlessness that the powerful often use to refer to them. Advocacy thus becomes an integral part of diaconal work, a public action when needed.

c. Training of an alternative lifestyle. This is especially relevant having in mind «the society of consumption» and its negative environmental consequences. According to this ideology, it has become more important to consume than to be. The social and ecological costs of this lifestyle are enormous and its effects jeopardize the wellbeing of others in other parts of the world, and in the end, our common future. It is not difficult to denounce the lifestyle that carries a co-responsibility for this development. But do we know an alternative life-style? This is a challenge to the church and its witness on justice, peace and the integrity of creation. If the church believes in change, this change should be exercised in the daily life of the church.

Also here we are dealing with a diakonia of solidarity, solidary with future generations and with all the creation. Maybe we need to develop what could be named *green* diakonia. It would have to be socially conscious and competent in order to avoid the tendencies of privatizing efforts in the name of individual moralism. To develop such an alternative lifestyle is by no means the exclusive task of the church. This lifestyle must gain trustworthiness in all spheres of society. The task of the church is to become yeast and thereby a witness of an alternative way of life, more than the one that results in destruction of society and environment. This is an important example of political diakonia that not only consists of denouncing injustice and its root causes, but also trains and exercises attitudes and acts that may serve as guidelines for a society that needs change.

d. Honesty concerning conflicts and conflicting interests. Diaconal action should not be naive, but seriously acknowledge the real conflict between those who long for change, and those who prefer the status quo. To some, change is a threat and

it provokes protest, critique and resistance. From this point of view, diakonia should not avoid conflicts when this is necessary. If not, it may be a sign that diakonia has become domesticated, and has lost its commitment of striving for change. This does not mean that diakonia should promote conflicts. On the contrary, the church is called to a «diakonia of reconciliation» (2 Corinthians 5:19). Diaconal actors should see that this ministry is not limited to the religious sphere and to religious words. Instead, it should make visible, in all spheres of life, the new reality created through God's reconciling action of Christ (Ephsians 2).

e. Impulses to be brought back to theology and to preaching. There is not only a movement from theology to diakonia, but one back from diakonia to theology as well. Deacons should report back to preachers, scholars, and church leaders with reports of their work, pointing to its potential for theological reflection and for interpreting the biblical message in today's world. There is always the risk that those in power get blinded by the narrow corridors of maintenance or of power. It is therefore so important that church leaders are confronted with expressions of faith from the periphery of church and society. This may reveal that the preaching is not heard as communicating good news, or that the Bible is presented in a way that gives the impression that it is reserved for the insiders.

Diakonia must have a critical eye on how power is exercised in the church. Is power used in order to maintain and satisfy the social needs of the insiders? Or, does the power of the church take the form of bold action for the sake of people who suffer and struggle in order to defend their dignity? The church has been empowered by God's Spirit to be salt of the earth and light of the world. This can implied being empowered for diaconal action. For that, well trained deacons are needed, in my opinion. Can the deacon provide competence and leadership so that the local congregation will not lose its power and be an inclusive community of life where there is space for all of its members, and especially the member that suffers? Such a community is a sign of hope, and it is promised that the gates of Hades never will overcome it (Matthew 16:18).

PART III:
DIAKONIA AS INTEGRAL PART
OF MISSION

CHAPTER 9

MISSION AS DIAKONIA

Praxis²⁴ needs meaningful words

In Brazil a conference on diakonia was closed with a session on evaluation. A woman from a small town in the hinterland said, «Now I know what I have always been doing is called. Its name is diakonia» She told the audience about the kind of activities she was involved in: organizing women farmers against the use of dangerous pesticides; participating in a local human rights movement; visiting sick persons in her community. She had always done this with an inner conviction that her action was profoundly motivated by her Christian faith, but she had heard very little in sermons and elsewhere in the church that affirmed a relation between these activities and her identity as a Lutheran Christian. During the conference she had discovered that link and also that which had engaged her for so many years, had a proper name with strong biblical roots: diakonia.²⁵

There is an important relation between what we do and the terminology we use. Sustainability has to do with both. Terms reveal the identity a specific activity is rooted in. Identity signifies the continuity of the activity, even if its focus shifts according to context. Identity tells what continues to be the same idea even in shifting circumstances. Identity also signifies that which integrates different elements of a subject. An organization might run a number of different activities, but normally there are some integrating traits that explain the composition of activities in all their variety. Identity always includes an understanding of what differs from other activities. The identity of the church makes its youth work different from other youth work, even if similarities sometimes seem to be most prominent.²⁶

24 The term 'praxis' is used for social action that is planned and goal oriented. In this way praxis should not be understood as any kind of practice.

25 I use the term 'diakonia' to indicate that it both includes a certain praxis, a social-framework that gives a determined identity (the church in its widest understanding), and a disciplined reflection (theory) in order to systematize what is being done in a professional way.

Mission as praxis and identity-giving

Over the last two centuries, mission has been a term that has expressed Christian identity. Despite many changes in our understanding and methodology, mission has continued to be a vital concern of the church. The Lutheran World Federation has repeatedly affirmed commitment to mission: 'Participation in the mission of God is the central purpose of the church.... The mission of the church always takes place within specific, changing, historic contexts and differing cultural situations and therefore bears their marks. Its continuity, however, is based on God's own activity in the world as revealed uniquely in the person of Jesus Christ and in the sending of the Holy Spirit' (LWF 1988:5). Thus the identity of the church's mission is rooted in God's own mission. To be in mission is an expression of God's graceful generosity towards creation and at the same time a task in which God's lordship is witnessed. It is both a given identity and an identity to be identified in the missionary praxis.

In other words, mission refers both to an historical praxis and an interpretation of Christian identity. Identity offers a criterion for self-evaluation and renewal. In situations where mission was perceived as a Western enterprise related to paternalistic approaches, the identity made possible a reformulation of the understanding of mission as God's mission. When mission practice in some contexts was seen to be concentrated in recruiting new members for local congregations, this same identity stimulated the development of the expression 'holistic mission.' Now perhaps this identity requires new concepts.

Development related to mission: a growing problem

Today, the distinction between mission and development work challenges the churches in their mission in a similar manner. Problems within the realm of practice are deeply related to terminology and the way in which identity is conceptualized.

As I see it, there are two major terminological problems. The first concerns the understanding of mission as evangelism and relating this term in a constructive way to mission at work. Here, the problem is how to relate proclamation as the very core of mission to a holistic approach. Should 'holistic' be understood in an all-embracing manner where every task and activity of the church is included in the missionary activity? Can such a comprehensive approach be upheld when it is insisted that the 'primary goal for the church's participation in God's mission' is 'to make disciples of all nations'? (LWF 1988:9). How can 'holistic mission' be more than just a rhetorical formula and a critique of some traditional mission

26 A broader theoretical grounding of this position, how praxis expresses character and identity, has been elaborated by Alasdair MacIntyre in his study in moral theory titled *After Virtue*.

practice? Can the expression be turned into constructive criteria for mobilizing churches in their mission and finding proper co-operation between partners?

The second problem concerns the terminology normally used for activities related to the 'work for peace and justice and in the struggle against all enslaving and dehumanizing powers' that the LWF document, «Together in God's Mission» understands as 'an integral part of the mission of the church' (LWF 1988:9). Normally these activities are classified as development or social action. These terms and their professional rationale belong to the world of development ideology of the last four decades. Ideologically, they include different political convictions. History can be shaped through social and political intervention. The societal models of the West (to Scandinavians, especially the social-democratic political model) should be adapted by developing countries. Economic growth is possible in the South if technology, systems of infrastructure, etc., are implanted according to Western models. The term that integrates all these convictions is development. It is optimistic both in its anthropology and in its political analysis. Following the rationale of most social work, its primary concern is the relation between goals and measures in order to facilitate changes identified by the professional as desirable for a group or a local community.

Strangely enough, churches have adopted the terminology and the rationale of development without too many questions. It has become the basic why and how of international social action. As development theories have changed during the last few decades, the churches have been faithful, and changed their rhetoric relating to development and service. One reason for this may be the churches' dependence on a Western political worldview and secularized approaches to social and political issues. Another reason may be the dependence on ODA²⁷-money of church-related agencies, a relationship that has linked funding to determined concepts regarding how this service should structure and perform its activities. Consequently, development work could not be combined with evangelism and community-building unless it could be explained in a way that gave local churches a role that would promote democratic structures and people's participation in development. The rationale as a whole however, has been determined by functionalist and socio-political arguments.

Critical questioning from churches in the South has not been able to subvert this ideological framework. Christians from Latin America have rejected development as a neo-colonialist term unable to deal with structures of dependency. Africans have questioned the building-up of structures where the departments of development in their churches easily could get money from abroad, while there was no interest in supporting other departments and, for instance, programmes of evangelization. As a result of this practice some churches suffered from new patterns of class difference: those working for development projects received cars and good working conditions, while pastors and evangelists hardly got any salary. In some parts of the world Christians wondered how agencies from the North could

27 ODA = Official Development Assistance.

work with governmental bodies and different NGOs without hesitation, but show no interest in working with local churches. It also became difficult to understand how Christians from the same country in the North could be represented by different agencies — one for mission, another for development — without any co-operation between them.

For some years this model has been discredited by the implosion of the modernist vision of universal development. Globalization follows quite different patterns. Optimism is being replaced by postmodern indifferentism. Public funds are drying up along with the developmentalist worldview. How do we deal with this situation? In my opinion, different initiatives should be made to make possible a reapproximation between the praxis and the identity of the church with regard to the understanding of mission. In other words, there is a need for renewal, and in my opinion this renewal implies both methodology and terminology.

Methodological renewal

Methodology means a consciousness about the manner in which a task is performed. Is it possible to reinvent mission in a holistic way that is more incarnated in people's lives than an overall theory on socio-political development? Here, 'incarnated' is understood to represent different perspectives:

- It places reality as experienced by people as the starting-point for reflection and action. A well-known example of this method is found in the tradition of see—judge—act within the Latin American theology of liberation.
- It opens the metaphysical dimension in the human quest for truth and justice. Thus it recognizes the same liberating power of God that was revealed in Jesus Christ in the struggle for life and human dignity in today's world. It also affirms the church's commission to testify in favour of hope and the future through word and deed.
- It presupposes an interdisciplinary reflection in which social and human sciences together with theology are asked to discern human conditions and possible transformation.

Terminological renewal

Closely related to the need for methodological renewal, there is also a need to reformulate terminology. In my opinion, the term 'diakonia' represents a possible way of giving 'what we are doing' a new name that is both critical and constructive, in the sense that it enables a relation to the identity of the church and to its understanding of mission.

In the Lutheran tradition, diakonia is most often understood as charity work. The historical background is the Diaconal Movement in Germany, founded by

persons such as Fliedner and Wichern, and organized as communities of deacons, professionally prepared for working in hospitals or other diaconal institutions. In addition to this specialized activity, diakonia has also been understood as charity work in wider terms. In some Lutheran circles it has been discussed whether diaconal work presupposes an ecclesial context, or whether it should be understood within the realm of creation, as any human being's call to do good works. Placed within this understanding, where diaconal work above all associates with charity, to alleviate suffering and comfort those who grieve, diakonia as a concept evidently has many limitations.

In a wider ecumenical context, diakonia relates to the ministry of the church. In many churches, a deacon is part of the ordained ministry, not necessarily related to charity work or social action, but either as a first step in the clerical career or as responsible for certain administrative duties. In this sense, diakonia should probably be understood to be whatever deacons do. Evidently, its contribution to the question under discussion here is minimal.

While these two understandings either reduce diakonia to poimenics or to a possible way of structuring the ministry, a third understanding sees it as an ecclesiological concept expressing the serving nature of the church. Accordingly, the diaconal dimension of the church is rooted in the biblical presentation of Jesus. He came 'to serve [Greek: diakonein] and give his life as a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45). The serving nature of his mission is presented as a model for his disciples (John 13). Most likely, the memory of the diaconal ministry of Jesus was decisive for the development of structures of leadership in the early Christian communities. Diakonia was the term for office or specific tasks given to a person (1 Corinthians 16:15; 2 Corinthians 5:18–19). It was also used for important activities (Acts 6:1–6). It is also interesting to note that the 'international campaign' organized by Paul to assist the poor in Jerusalem was simply called 'the diakonia' (Romans 15:31; 2 Corinthians 8–9).

Summing up, we see that diakonia has a christological basis. It is an expression of the church's nature and as such is manifest in the way in which the church is structured and assumes practical responsibility, especially for the needy and the excluded.

How could this concept of diakonia be useful for the topic under discussion? First, some cases where diakonia has become part of a revitalized language. In Brazil, the Evangelical Church of Lutheran Confession in Brazil (IECLB) through its department for diaconal work, tries to foster a diaconal consciousness both in congregations and among those who are responsible for different projects. Through this effort IECLB hopes to encourage local responsibility, rooted primarily in its identity as Christian communion, and thus reduce the dependency on foreign resources and structures. In a similar way, Norchurchaid (NCA) in Norway is now presenting itself as an organization of international diakonia. Thus the organization has rediscovered concerns that were central to those who founded it 50 years ago. At that time it was considered important to express NCA's identity as a church-related agency in continuity with the diaconal

mandate of local congregations, which forms the constituency of NCA in Norway. But at the same time, the use of this term also indicates a profound dependency on the faith, the hope and the serving love of sisters and brothers in churches around the world and to whom NCA is related through different programmes and projects. This terminology does not limit diaconal activity to strict ecclesial structures. As a diaconal special agency NCA considers itself within the tradition of diaconal institutions with a mandate to act primarily among the marginalized and needy, also when and where the church as a local congregation is absent in these specific contexts.

Mission as diakonia

How should diakonia be related to mission? There are two possibilities, depending on how mission is defined. When mission is being defined as the all-embracing task of the church, diakonia should be considered a fundamental dimension of mission. There is a long tradition of seeing *liturgia*, *kerygma* and *diakonia* as the three main dimensions of Christian *koinonia*. An important task for missiology would then be to find the integrating point of this identity, in a way that is ecclesiological and not merely functional or practical. The understanding of the LWF as 'serving communio' (Curitiba 1990) presents a creative point of departure for reflecting the diaconal relationship between member churches. The term 'service' may be too vague to maintain this relationship to the identity of the church. There is always a risk that service is reduced to social action according to a socio-political understanding, and without links to the theological framework that I consider fundamental.

If mission is seen as synonymous to *kerygma* or the task of evangelization (a definition that is as possible as the other one), the missiological task consists in elaborating the reciprocal relation between mission and *diakonia*, but also the distinct identity of each movement. Put in simplistic terms, the first may be said to aim at faith, the second at transformation. Now faith — in its widest sense as a human phenomenon — is an intrinsic part of and a basic condition for transformation. On the other hand, transformation means dealing with human realities, reacting to injustice and suffering, empowering the excluded to be agents of change, dignifying human life, and constructing a more sustainable society.

Either of the above two definitions should result in witness and service being seen as distinct, but inseparable, mutually necessary expressions of God's mission to the world.

The diaconal dimension of mission can help Christian witness to be more incarnated in people's lives. Contextualization is correctly regarded as a vital challenge to mission, but normally this has been understood as an approximation to people's culture and religious worldview. It could be however, that doing is the most convincing way of being contextualized, following the example of Jesus, who through his *diakonia*, his care for others and especially his solidarity with the sick

and marginalized, manifested his mission for the 'lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Matthew 10:6). Jesus' contextual doing is characterized both by being critical and being active, and it involves a quest for interpretation. In response to his intervention in favor of the widow in Nain, where the mother was given back her dead son, the following interpretation was made by those who had witnessed what had happened: 'God has visited his people!' (Luke 7:16). To them, incarnation was revealed as a real saving presence in a context of death and grief.

In the same manner, diaconal doing should express the Good News incarnated in people's lives and struggle, as an expression of God's mission in which also the church is called to participate. This understanding is in continuity with the practice of the ancient church. At that time, Christians interpreted care for the sick and needy as a way of bringing the kingdom to earth, thus anticipating what hope is longing for. Is Christian mission possible today without this kind of incarnatory contextualization?

The mission dimension of diakonia can help Christians interpret their action in favour of the suffering and marginalized as good work and as expressions of God's provident care for creation. These two perspectives are interrelated. The first upgrades good work as a meaningful act in itself, and not only as an expression of some theoretical system, as normally the case in social work. Modernity has often mocked good works as charity, ideologically considered very suspect, but acceptable if it could be integrated into professional and theoretical frameworks. Post modernity has questioned any work as good or meaningful. In such ideological contexts it becomes a challenge to express faith in doing good as meaningful, both in itself and also as a potential for constructing meaning in people's lives and relations.

Diaconal faith regards good works as possible fruits of God's love and care for creation. This second perspective may be related to the classical understanding of God's providence. This expression affirms that God acts *pro nobis* (not contra), which does not mean God's predestination, but saving presence in all situations. Further, the term presents an active God who listens and sees; his sensibility makes the voiceless heard and the excluded seen. This image of God makes possible a diaconal spirituality that considers sensibility for human suffering a central expression of Christian discipleship. Following the word of the Lord, 'What do you want me to do for you' (Matthew 20:32), diakonia is called to a praxiological witness of God's provident care for creation. Can diakonia in its praxis maintain its identity and sustainability without such spirituality, especially in situations where action seems meaningless?

In the LWF, holistic mission has become a key expression. The LWF mission document from 1988 states that:

The wholeness of mission needs to be manifested by the unity of word and deed in all of the church's outreach. Both are vehicles of the unconditional love of God who accepts persons while they are yet sinners and without any regard to their social, racial or cultural background. Word without deed falsifies the very word itself as it makes the gospel abstract and denies God's transforming power in creation and in incarnation.

The failure to accompany witness through word, by witness through life may close the door to the gospel. On the other hand, the deed without the word is in danger of degenerating into sheer humanitarianism and conformity with the context and of failing to convey the fullness of salvation as God's gift. The credibility of the witness is ultimately grounded not in deeds, which are bound to remain imperfect, but in the gospel itself (LWF 1988:22).

Again, the question is how to make this more than a rhetorical formula. In my opinion, it is vital to stimulate both missiology and the science of diakonia (diakonics) in an interdisciplinary reflection, regarding the epistemological framework, the methodological approaches, and above all the theological implications of this interrelation. This could give new guidelines, both for mission and for international diaconal work.

CHAPTER 10

THE MISSIONAL CHURCH

Transformation, reconciliation, empowerment

Introducing *Mission in Context*

In the late 1960's the term «mission» came under attack. This depended partly on a critical reading of the history of Western mission as strategic alliance with colonial powers and thus contributing to the submission of African and Asian people. It was partly an expression of the wave of independence in these continents striving for indigenous ways of being church, claiming that the power of foreign missionaries should come to an end. Since then, the understanding of mission has been reformulated, shifting its focus from missionary organisations in the West and their activities, to God's mission (*missio dei*) and what the worldwide church is called to participate in.

For the Lutheran World Federation, an important milestone in the reflection on mission was reached in 1988 with the mission document: *Together in God's Mission*. Here two fundamental themes were lifted up:

- Mission is the ongoing saving work of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit;
- Mission is God's mandate to God's people to participate in this continuing saving work (LWF 1988:5)

Ten years later, the LWF organized a global consultation on *Churches in Mission* in Nairobi, Kenya. The participants affirmed «that the mission of God is rooted in God's love and concern for humanity and for all creation. (...) We encourage congregations to renew, train and equip each baptized Christian to be a witness to Jesus Christ and, therefore, a missionary empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit. As congregations we are called to be communities of witnessing, caring and healing...» (LWF1988:17).

The consultation also recommended a revision of the LWF Mission Document. Six years later this new document *Mission in Context* (LWF 2005), was

received by the LWF Council, and has given member churches a new tool for reflecting on how mission should be understood in our time.

This article intends to introduce *Mission in Context*, pointing at some of its main concerns, and reading it within the European context. Our reading will follow the structure of its three parts: the first seeks to discern and name today's contexts of mission, the second, establishes a theological platform for the understanding of mission, and the last part indicates what the practice of mission may be in our time, giving name to some challenges and opportunities.

The European context

If we look at our context as European churches, there may be other elements added to those that are reflected in the mission document. These are a few key elements:

- Our social-political context is characterised by a number of «*post*»-realities. From an historical point of view, both post-communism and the post-welfare-state are expressions of modernity's ambition to construct future ambitions that have now imploded. The latest «no» to the visions of a united Europe²⁸ may be understood as valid reactions against centralisation and neo-liberal ideology, but also as fear regarding the future and lack of confidence in political projects. In a context of «post-reality,» the mind of the people is more determined by what is *now* than by projects for the future that we would be eager to construct together.
- Some observers refer to a general *fear* (*Angst*) as a sort of collective reaction to social and political changes in society. People fear that they will lose their welfare benefit, that they will have no access to hospital and care when needed. They fear immigrants. They fear violence in their own streets and parks. From one perspective this fear expresses the helplessness of *post-modern individualism*, where both traditional networks of family and local community (rooted in pre-modern time) and modern networks (organisations, political parties etc.) have lost most of their importance. It may be that the fear is also caused by the fact that people are becoming aware of the limitations of the otherwise highly prized individualism, limitations which have been exacerbated due to the de-construction of community links. When newspapers recently reported that a man died and for almost 500 days was in his flat without anyone missing him, we start to ask what went wrong, not only with his fate, but also with the human community.
- Post-modern *secularisation* is embedded in this development. In modernity, the church continues to play a role as an institution, although her traditional

²⁸ This refers to referenda in EU countries that resulted in the rejection of the European Constitution.

position in society and in people's minds was questioned and many turned away from Christian faith and practice. In post-modernity we, from one point of view, experience a renewed interest in religious life, but according to the mentality of individualism, namely that of tasting and consuming. Sociologists of religion have described this as «believing without belonging,» compared with modernity's «belonging without believing» (Davie 1994).

Of course, much more could be said concerning our European context. If these elements are significant because they in certain ways determine how people act and think, does this challenge us as churches? What is our mission in today's Europe? Will the church be marked by the same old traits? Or, do we see a church that is empowered to present an alternative way of seeing reality and of action based on faith, hope and love?

Missional church in Europe

For some it may sound impossible to give a meaningful understanding to the concept of mission. Not only because it reminds us of a history when mission was linked to colonialism and was infected by Western arrogance and paternalism, but also because today we are in the process of learning to respect the faith of others. Should we therefore replace evangelism with inter-religious dialogue?

The mission document states that mission is not an activity initiated by the church or by groups within the church. Theologically speaking, the mission belongs to God; the church is called to participate in God's mission. Not as a burdensome task, but «as a gift of God's grace, a gift grounded in and flowing from the in-breaking reign of God in Christ.» From this perspective the church is by nature missional, profoundly marked by God's grace and the good news that gives hope and a future for all humankind.

This means that it is not for the church to determine whether it will or will not be in mission. Mission belongs to her intrinsic nature, as Jesus told his disciples: «As the Father sent me, so I send you» (John 20:21).

Even if this is evident from an ecclesiological point of view, it may still seem to be problematic to name this mandate «mission,» especially if this concept calls forth negative associations. On the other hand, it could also be that we are too sensitive to reactions from the 1960s and the 1970s, and overlook the reality in which churches today perform their mission.

- Mission is no longer an activity rooted in the North and directed to the South. Today, the churches in the South have taken a leading role in mission activity. Most missionaries today are sent by churches in the South, very often as a South-South co-operation.

- Mission expresses partnership and sharing of resources. Different than what is the norm in today's globalized world, mission stands for long standing committed relationships and friendships.
- Mission work has always included both proclamation and diaconal work. Over the last few years, advocacy has been added to what is now seen as a holistic understanding of mission.
- Mission is not understood as an alternative to inter-faith dialogue. Therefore, mission should not take any form of proselytism, but always be rooted in the freedom to confess and express one's own faith.

How could the European churches learn from this renewal of mission that has taken place ecumenically over the last decades?

A first task for us is to see how we may learn from our sister churches in the South. In earlier times, we often thought it was our task to be the teachers of the world. Perhaps now, the times call for mutual learning and sharing of experiences. It is important to recognise that the worldwide church has contributed largely to ecumenical theological reflection. This has given visible expression to the understanding of being an organic communion and the spiritual importance of sharing pain and joy. Experiences of participation in people's struggle for dignity and freedom have opened up new perspectives of biblical witness, and have renewed the theological vocabulary. The three key concepts of the mission document, *transformation*, *reconciliation* and *empowerment*, have been lifted up and given solid theological significance by Christians in the South. We should receive these concepts as gifts and potential for our renewal as missional churches in our own context.

Migration as gift and possibility

Let me add another perspective to the new reality of movements from the South to the North. The most notable is manifested in a flow of migration. Before 1925, 85% of all international migrants originated from Europe. Now the flow has turned, and tens of thousands are moving to Europe and North America from countries in the South and from the East.

Normally, people in Europe consider this development to be a problem. The churches have done their best to defend the immigrants, they have condemned tendencies of racism and even in some cases granted church asylum, when asylum seekers were denied permission to stay in the country.

But the immigrants have almost always continued to be «them,» outside the life of the churches. The main churches continue to be marked by their ethnic roots, their historical social position and the behaviour of middle class values and interest. Instead of entering the traditional churches, the immigrants form their own churches, as a sort of underground network, often absolutely ignored by the official church structures. In Britain the establishment of African immigrant churches

ches dates back to the early 1960s. They now number 3,000 congregations. These churches are mushrooming throughout Europe, and the number of African Christians is thought to be in excess of three million (Haar 1998:92; Gerloff 2001:277).

Could this be different? Dr. Richard M. Lubawa, Assistant Bishop from Tanzania, points to the fact that «from the very beginning, the spread of the Gospel was connected to migrant networks – the inception of the Gentile mission is marked by the action of unnamed migrant refugees in Antioch (Acts 11:19–20). In later centuries, the Christian faith spread mainly through kinship and commercial networks, migrant movements (some stimulated by persecution), and other informal means.»²⁹

If Dr. Lubawa is correct in designating Christianity a migratory religion, in what way should this influence our self-understanding as a missional church in the European context? Dr. Lubawa adds another perspective: «The heartland of the Church is no longer in Europe, decreasingly in North America, but (it is) in Latin America, in certain parts in Asia, and, in Africa». According to the estimates of the *World Christian Encyclopaedia* (2nd edition 2001), African Christians have increased at a rate of 23,000 new Christians a day (or 8.5 million a year), while churches in Europe and North America lose an estimated 6,000 church members a day. If from this perspective we are reminded of the vision in Acts 16:9 where a man from Europe (Macedonia) asked for help, an answer to our petition is already at hand.

Saying this does not imply idealising migration. We should by no means ignore its negative root causes, especially how people in the South suffer because they have been victims of poverty, oppression and war, and more recently of the mechanisms of exclusion set up according to the standards of neoliberal globalisation. We should also acknowledge how their home countries are being drained of human resources, which are very much needed.

But it follows the understanding of the theology of the cross that God's mercy is present even where evil seems to reign. We may learn from the Old Testament story about Joseph and his brothers, in another context of migration and uncertainty regarding the future, as they feared the role one they had excluded now might play. And Joseph said to them: «Fear not, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones. Thus he reassured them and comforted them» (Genesis 50:19–21).

This is a story about *reconciliation*, showing how honesty about what has happened in the past may lead to healed relations. It is also a story about *transformation*, in the sense that fear is taken seriously, but without giving in to it. Instead, minds are being renewed to see things differently, as God's gracious action and

29 *Migrating Mission: The Shifting Gravity of Christianity and Its Implications*. Keynote Address delivered at the 21st Annual Lutheran Mission Conference, March 19, 2005 at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota,

promise of accompaniment. Thereby all are *empowered* to live in a way «the little ones» are provided for and everyone is comforted.

Mission as transformation, reconciliation, empowerment

Coming back to the document *Mission in Context*, I would like to make some comments regarding the three mentioned key concepts.

Transformation, which is unfortunately quite difficult to translate into other European languages, is from one point of view a concept that relates to socio-economic reality and the urgent need for change in order to break out of situations of injustice, exclusion and increasing gaps between the rich and poor. But unlike «development» and «social change» concepts that are largely products of modernity and professional ambition of constructing society according to their own models of what is good for the poor, transformation is carried by the conviction that we all should be transformed, and that nobody is the «owner» of the process of transformation. At the same time, transformation assures that this process can not be limited to just one area of society, for instance, to economy or production. It involves culture, social structure, ideological framework, and especially systems of faith and the values that are formed by what people believe.

For Christians, transformation has a strong spiritual connotation. It links to the admonishment of St. Paul who told the believers «not to be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect» (Romans 12:2). Thus transformation rejects conformism. It expresses an alternative way for experiencing God's will. As the mission document reads, «transformation, perceived in the light of Christ's resurrection, is the unfolding of the potential life-giving nature of all creation and an expression of the working of God's grace in nature. It is the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit to effect transformation in and through the church to the whole world.»

The document warns against triumphalistic views of transformation and reminds that mission «must be carried out under the sign of the cross to strengthen solidarity and hope.» And finally, walking «in the way of Christ in the midst of a broken and violent world, the church itself undergoes deep and often painful transformation».

When this is said, it should be underlined that the church as institution, for sociological reasons seems to be conservative and therefore does not necessarily accept transformation easily. In many ways, the intention of Martin Luther was to transform the church of his time, but he was rejected by the church authorities. Sociological mechanisms should therefore always be adjusted by the ecclesiological principle of «ecclesia semper reformanda.» What does this mean in our context today and in relation to the challenges before us?

If transformation points at the pneumatological dimension of being a missional church, the concept of *empowerment* does also, and even more strongly. From one point of view, empowerment was first used in the field of social and political action. Its main objective has always been to find a method of work that would empower the powerless (or even better, those made powerless), assuring them a role of being subject to their own fate.

From a theological perspective, empowerment relates to the promise of Pentecost, «you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses ... to the end of the earth» (Acts 1:8). The story of Pentecost tells how the disciples were transformed, how their fear was overcome, how their questions of the past were replaced by words proclaiming «the mighty works of God» as their language was transformed according to the context that surrounded them. It is the conviction of the church that God continues to empower his people, not only apostles and others who have assumed leadership, but especially those who apparently, have nothing to say. God reveals his grace and power by choosing «what is low and despised in the world» (1 Corinthians 1:28), lifting up their voices to the praise of his Name. This has of course, both a spiritual and a social implication. In Latin America a parallel concept to empowerment is «dignification,» which means defending and lifting up dignity of people and giving them the ability of being «subjects» – both in church and society.

Theologically, baptism is an act of empowerment whereby the baptised is ordained to participate in God's mission. Too often when we talk about human resources in the church, this is done too narrowly, only counting clergy and staff. In many churches there is a strong tradition of involving volunteers, but there is a risk of defining voluntary work according to the needs and activities defined by the pastor/staff. It could also be asked if «volunteer» is an adequate term for what is imbedded in the Lutheran theology of baptism and the tradition of the priesthood of all believers. Here, empowerment goes far beyond that of being a disposition for voluntary work.

As people of God equipped for mission, the church is called to «participate in God's reconciling mission as God's ambassador, beseeching people on behalf of Christ to be reconciled with God. *Reconciliation* first of all refers to God's action, through which human beings get their relation to God restored. At the same time, restoration implies being transformed and empowered for «the diakonia of reconciliation» (2 Corinthians 5:19). The concept «diakonia» clearly reminds us of the diakonia of Jesus, his way of unconditional presence among the poor, his prophetic defence of the excluded, his acts of healing and last but not least, his announcement of forgiveness and new life under the promise of a new age to come. This is the way for the church to follow, in her mission of reconciliation.

What then is our mission of reconciliation as European churches in a world marked by increasing divisions between North and South? If we, as the Lutheran family, have formed a communion of churches, of which the LWF is an expression and instrument, what sort of walking together should that takes us to? Is it possi-

ble to look upon the communion not only as a structure, but as a process with a potential of bringing about reconciliation in a global world?

Finding new ways

The last section of *Mission in Context* has as title *Practice of Mission*. Reading it, you may find it too open-ended and without the kind of concrete recommendations that you were looking for. It could, be however, that this is a wise way of putting it. After all, the paradigm applied is that of accompaniment which per se is open ended – open to contexts and developments.

Having this in mind let me conclude with some final observations:

- In a time when so many European churches have to remodel their structures, the concept of missional church may be both liberating and refreshing. It could inspire those of us that have to deal with the constraints of finances to remember that the real resources of the church are her members, with all the gifts that have been bestowed on them.
- Some churches have established a division of labour between mission, diakonia and other areas of action. If division of labour leads to division of identity such departmentalisation must be reconsidered.
- To be a missional church implies to rediscover that the church is a movement, a migrant reality, consisting of people in movement. Not without reason, the first Christians were called those who belonged to the Way, certainly referring in the first place to the Lord who said of himself that he was the Way, but also reflecting the mobility of his believers, as pilgrims in this world. Confessing the Way implies confidence in accompaniment; «I am with you always, to the close of the age» (Matthew 28:20). Following the paradigm of the Emmaus story in Luke 24, a missional church is a church that accompanies, being ready to walk together with those who are on the road, sensitive to people's experiences and questions, empowered to communicate surprisingly good news, prepared to share gift and table communion – so that transformation, empowerment and reconciliation may happen. And ready to be itself constantly the subject of transformation because of these encounters on the road!

CHAPTER 11

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES OF CHURCH LEADERSHIP

Introduction

Within the ecumenical movement over the last decades there has been a fervent discussion on the understanding of the church's ministry. The so-called Lima-document (WCC 1982) contributed strongly to setting the agenda of this debate, pointing at the potential of a three-fold ministry of bishop, presbyter and deacon, for instance. Many Lutheran churches have been rather skeptical about this idea as their tradition has claimed that there is only one ministry in the church. On the other hand, in many Lutheran churches the bishop's ministry is being introduced without always clarifying how this ministry is to be understood theologically. The LWF therefore, undertook a process of reflection in 2002, consulting all member churches. That eventually led to a Statement on the Episcopal ministry received by the LWF Council meeting in Lund, Sweden in 2007 which unanimously adopted it (LWF 2008).

In the Preface to the published version of the statement, the LWF General Secretary, Dr. Ishmael Noko, expresses «... hope that this document can provide both a measuring stick for our current practices and also a springboard for continuing conversation about the shapes of ministry which in our time faithfully express the gospel and strengthen the Church's mission for the world.»

This article is motivated by the same hope, as I shall focus on some of the present challenges of church leadership. It is based on the conviction that reflection on church leadership must be interdisciplinary in the sense that not only must it take into account theological and ecclesiological knowledge, but also insight from the social sciences, and especially how leadership is critically reflected in the secular world. In the dialectic between the two, church leaders may find a clearer understanding of their role and how to cope with the challenges of the church in today's world.

In the following I shall share with you some general reflections on leadership and the common assertion about the leadership crisis in political and economic life today. Then I shall lift up some important insights from the Lund statement on the episcopal ministry and church leadership in the hope of portraying the basic identity and values of church leadership. I hope that this might take us into a constructive dialogue with secular disciplines when dealing with contemporary challenges of leadership. As affirmed in the above mentioned Preface to the statement, these discussions are important, «because the church is important.» It is a major responsibility of those exercising leadership positions in the church to make people – both inside and outside the church - see why the Church is important.

Thrust and communication

«Leadership» is a key word in our time. Innumerable books have been written on this subject in recent decades, and leadership training, either in the shape of formal education, or as coaching or consultancy work, has become big business.

In spite of all this growing knowledge of what good leadership is, the media is filled with reports on leadership crises. This goes for political leadership, economic leadership and also religious leadership. Warren Bennis, founder of the Leadership Institute at the University of Southern California, maintains the opinion that:

(W)e find a crisis in leadership everywhere we look today. Humanity currently faces three extraordinary threats: the threat of annihilation as a result of nuclear accident or war, the threat of a worldwide plague or ecological catastrophe, and a deepening leadership crisis in most of our institutions. Unlike the possibility of plague or nuclear holocaust, the leadership crisis will probably not become the basis for a best-seller or a blockbuster movie, but in many ways it is the most urgent and dangerous of the threats we face today, if only because it is insufficiently recognized and little understood.³⁰

This may of course, sound extremely exaggerated. Nevertheless, we know from history how dramatically bad leadership may affect the lives of millions of people. Europe has produced quite a few bad political leaders in the past and even today we fear what may happen if there is a lack of good leadership.

Another arena of leadership crisis is the business world. According to analysts, one of the main causes of the present mortgage crisis in the USA is a lack of competent leadership in the economic sector. Fred Steingraber, a former chairman and chief executive officer (CEO), claims that short-tenured CEOs and a lack of long-term thinking have contributed to an international leadership crisis. He lifts up the following:

30 <http://hbr.org/1996/01/the-leader-as-storyteller/ar/1>

- CEOs now serve only four to five years, which is not enough time to develop or revamp a company.
- Due in part to short tenure, today's business leaders are more focused on short-term performance than on a company's long-term health.
- Executive compensation plans have become heavily laden with options, which also push executives to focus on short-term goals. The average CEO in the 1980s made 20 times what an average employee in his company earned. A couple of years ago, that figure had jumped to 600 times. The rate has fallen in the last couple of years, but not to the level of the 1980s.³¹

Is this relevant for church leadership? At a first glance, it may seem that it is not, but on further reflection it becomes clear that the general leadership crisis is deeply affecting the life of the church, as the church and its members are part of the world and suffer the same negative consequences of bad leadership as any other citizen.

Secondly, deteriorating public confidence in political and economic leadership has repercussions for the general attitude towards church leadership, as well as among church members. The picture however, is quite complex. There are, on the one hand, quite high expectations that church leaders should voice publically moral and existential issues, yet on the other hand, the media are eager to communicate that church leaders no longer have the authority they exercised one or two generations ago.

We must however, distinguish between questions of church leadership as a media-created issue, and church leadership as an issue from the perspective of being church and of understanding leadership according to the distinctiveness of this identity. There is a risk of allowing the media to set the agenda for church leadership, and the main problem here is that the media tend to disconnect leaders from their normal functions and relations. They may give a lot of space to a bishop, but not to the church, presenting him or her as the so-and-so bishop, according to the media's need for known faces and clear opinions.

In today's media-created understanding of reality, this may be the first challenge for church leadership to reflect on. The church's presence in this reality is unavoidable, but how to exercise leadership within this context is a challenging task with more theological and ecclesiological consequences than are often recognized.

Allow me to point to another important issue before we come to the specific theological dimension of church leadership, namely the fact that church leadership implies church management.

Management, of course, encompasses many responsibilities and skills, for instance those related to the organizational processes of planning, decision-making, executing, and reporting. Studies, nevertheless, reveal that other components are decisive, especially when relating to employee satisfaction, or should we say, the general well-being in an organization:

31 http://www.chicagobooth.edu/news/2005-02-22v_steingraber.aspx

- Trust and confidence in top leadership is the single most reliable indicator of employee satisfaction in an organization.
- Effective communication by leadership in three critical areas is the key to winning organizational trust and confidence:
 - 1 Helping employees understand the company's overall business strategy.
 - 2 Helping employees understand how they contribute to achieving key business objectives.
 - 3 Sharing information with employees on both how the company is doing and how an employee's own division is doing - relative to strategic business objectives.

So in a nutshell, what studies show is that a leader must be *trustworthy* and have the ability to *communicate a vision* of where the organization needs to go.

This should make us reflect as church leaders. How do we understand trustworthiness? What is the vision that we want to communicate? The crucial question is this: How are church leaders prepared to assume the role of trustworthiness and communication? Are they naturally gifted for this task? Is it enough to be trained as theologians? Or is additional training needed for those who take upon themselves roles of leadership in the church?

Building leadership

Theories of leadership state that there are three basic ways to explain how people become leaders³².

- Some personality traits may naturally lead people into leadership roles. This is the *Trait Theory*.
- A crisis or important event may cause a person to rise to the occasion, which brings out extraordinary leadership qualities in an ordinary person. This is the *Great Events Theory*.
- People can choose to become leaders. People can learn leadership skills. This is the *Transformational Leadership Theory*.

I wonder which of these is most common in the church. And then the next question is: Which way is most helpful in providing the church with good leaders? How are churches structured in order to foster good leadership and to encourage people who sense a vocation for leadership tasks in the church?

This is one aspect of the context, with the kind of questions referred to above, in which the LWF document «*Episcopal Ministry within the Apostolicity of the Church*» is to be read. Of course, there are also other important contexts, such as

32 <http://www.scribd.com/doc/13261066/Chapter-4-Leadership>

the ecumenical reflection on the ministry of the church, and the possibility of shared understanding and even mutual recognition of the episcopal ministry. This LWF document makes a solid contribution to this major theological task, as it brings the worldwide Lutheran communion to a shared position.

However, this context of ecumenical relationships and processes does not diminish the relevance of the document for a broader critical reflection on church leadership. With this in mind, I would like to point to the following observations which are lifted up by the document:

1. Leadership belongs to the being of church and should be interpreted theologically as God's gift to the church. In other words, leadership is not just an organizational matter and something that may be considered optional. The diversity of traditions and forms of organizing and naming this leadership affirms the richness and the commonalities of the one episcopal ministry (# 2). This fact requires sound and critical theological reflection in order to secure the fundamental focus of church leadership.

2. The episcopal ministry is related intrinsically to the mission of the church (# 27) and, as such, is in continuity with Christ's sending to the world and the mandate given to the whole people of God. Thus, this ministry cannot be seen in isolation, as if it had a goal in itself, nor can it be fulfilled in isolation. In the document, it is affirmed that the biblical Greek links *episcopo* to visitation (# 7), which also indicates the sending dimension of the ministry. Therefore, *episcopo* as «oversight» should not be understood in the first place as duty to control due to a hierarchical position «over», but much more as a mandate to «see to» in order to strengthen and empower for participation in God's mission.

3. This ministry of «seeing to» includes seeing to the needs of the poor and to situations of suffering and injustice. The document affirms that the episcopal ministry «points to the diaconal dimensions of the apostolic tradition» (# 61) as modeled in the ministry of Jesus. It would, therefore contradict this tradition to limit the episcopal ministry to be «a pastor of pastors» if this is interpreted as oversight primarily related to the function and work of the pastors. The episcopal ministry is mandated to care «for the life of the whole church» (# 43), in other words: care for all dimensions of being church and for all forms of church leadership. It may be helpful to remember that the Latin word *ministerium* is a translation of the Greek word *diakonia* used in the New Testament.

4. The unity of the church is one of the core tasks of the episcopal ministry (#14). Since Cyprian the bishop has been portrayed as a bond of unity, referring to the relationship between a local church and the universal church. This is a special challenge in today's globalized world with its tendency to install mechanisms of exclusion along social, national/ethnic, and economic borders between nations and people. In our understanding here, the episcopal minister is mandated to con-

fess the *una sancta* and strengthen world-wide networks of belonging together in faith and solidarity. However, it also refers to the unity within the local church, where mechanisms of exclusion may be established.

5. This sending dimension of the episcopal ministry is not limited to the space of the church. It is a public ministry and in function of the church' sending to the world (#37–38). Its diaconal dimension affirms its public nature as poverty and suffering experienced by human beings, and not primarily by Christians. The document relates this to «the church's accountability in the world,» making it clear that it is not for the promotion or personal possession of any individual minister. The reminder is a helpful correction of how the media portray church leaders and urges them to perform.

6. It may be said that the document, when presenting the episcopal ministry, is rather idealistic and that a critical reference to negative experiences of how this ministry has been executed in the past and at present is lacking. It is a fact that in many churches this ministry has been shaped by monarchs and other worldly authority and has been used to silence and even oppress people. Are certain traits, which easily lead to abuse, built into it, and how should that be reflected theologically? There is mention of abuse during the time of the Reformation (# 24), but without a thorough systematic analysis. There is also mention of the call «to demonstrate humility and simplicity of life,» but this is mainly kept at a personal and spiritual level, and not reflected critically as a question of how to manage religious power. The fact that episcopal ministers are given both administrative and religious authority makes it easy for them to mix up roles. At one moment, they listen to someone's confessions and at another; they take decisions regarding the person's job situation and future in the church. It may not be the scope of this document to deal with these challenges, but in the concrete life of the church this is where the episcopal ministry is exercised and where a too idealistic picture may affirm power, which also needs critical observation.

While this document refers to the episcopal ministry, the focus of my presentation has been on church leadership. As indicated initially, this leadership, as one main expression of church leadership, has to be reflected within today's context. It is within this context that expectations are shaped and frustrations experienced.

As indicated, trustworthiness and communicating a vision are two key requirements in the secular understanding of leadership. What is the relevance of these terms in church leadership, for instance in exercising the episcopal ministry? Could we claim that the apostolic tradition of leadership as modeled by Jesus, focuses exactly on these values? If that is the case, how do we foster leadership models which bring about such values?

We have noted that there are three basic ways in which persons become leaders. How are these ways paved in the church? How do they reflect the theological understanding of ministry as service and as participation in God's mission to the world? How do we apply the comprehension of the ministry being «exercised per-

sonally, collegially and communally»? (#47) Can people be trained so that they exercise their ministry according to this ideal and how should such training be organized?

There are more questions than answers here. It is my hope, however that the LWF document on the episcopal ministry has brought greater theological clarity to the topic and that it may provoke good discussion and constructive initiatives in the churches.

Liberating leadership

Some years ago while teaching theology in Brazil and bringing up the issue of leadership, many students questioned the legitimacy of any structure of authority in the church. Perhaps this was due to their experience of the abuse of political authority, either for the oppression of others or for personal gain. In their opinion, church authority was doomed to develop similar traits. As an alternative, they were striving for models of circular church structures and shared authority.

I have to confess that I share very much their reservations regarding strict hierarchical power lines in the church. Yet, on the other hand, authority may also be exercised as power *for*, not necessarily as power *over*. This is how Jesus exercised his Messianic authority (*exousia*), as power to lift up the sick and downtrodden, to include the sick and excluded in society and in the communion of his kingdom, and even to empower them to participate in his mission to the world. This authority for people, in defense of their dignity and for transformation, reconciliation, and empowerment is the sort of authority that Jesus commended the apostles to use in their leadership roles (Mark 10:42–45; John 13:15; 20:21). It is not power over, as often experienced in the world where the powerful use their authority to keep people down, to silence them and to subject to their exclusive action.

The question is therefore, *how* authority is exercised in the church. The model that Jesus himself embodied is deeply rooted in the good news of God's liberating and sanctifying action and empowered by the Spirit of justifying grace. This adds freedom to the fundamental traits for church leadership, as expressions of God's free gift to be exercised in the spirit of grace and freedom. As the Apostle Paul concludes after reflecting on his leadership role referring to what the Lord has told him: «My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness» (2 Corinthians 12:8).

This may also be the deep wisdom of the words in Luke (17:10), where the disciples are told to say after they have done all that they were ordered to do: «We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!» At first sight, this indicates a sort of self-humiliation that we reject, both for church leaders and for any other person. But it may well be that this is not what is intended, and that the real message here is to affirm grace and freedom as the principal support of all Christian ministry. By God's grace belonging is not experienced as slavery, but as a gracious gift and freedom to serve. And then, in the midst of all

their hard work, they are given to hear that they are invited - by the same grace – «Come here at once and take your place at the table.»

It is this profound dimension of grace and freedom that empowers for exercising authority in Christian leadership at any level, including the episcopal ministry. In all our efforts to train and secure professional skills at the level of church leadership, this basic nature should not be neglected, but be affirmed and reflected.

CHAPTER 12

THE ECCLESIOLOGICAL SELF-UNDERSTANDING OF THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION: FROM «FREE ASSOCIATION» TO «COMMUNION OF CHURCHES»

The fundamental problem

One of the most disputed questions at the Eighth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), held in Curitiba, Brazil, January-February 1990, was the proposal to change its constitution, so that the LWF would be redefined as a «communion of churches» rather than «a free association of churches.» The proposal was ultimately adopted with the necessary two-thirds majority — with neither one vote more nor less — thus putting a full stop not only to an intense debate, but also to a harrowing lobbying activity which seemed in strong contrast to the concept of *communio*.

In most cases, the vigorous opposition of the minority to a change in the constitution was determined by an at least equally strong opposition to the Executive Committee's proposal to revise the Federation's structure. This proposal (which was also adopted) was judged by the opponents to involve an alarming centralization, with the consequence that the Secretariat in Geneva, and thereby the general secretary, received far too much power. When the motion concerning the new structure was justified in terms of the new self-understanding which the LWF received through the ecclesiology of *communio*, this was seen as an unacceptable coupling of the ecclesiology of *communio* and the debate about structure, as if the

communio ecclesiology must necessarily imply the structural changes which the Executive Committee had proposed. This was maintained above all by Germans and Finns, who led the struggle against the new structure and against any change in the constitution. The Danes, on the other hand, went even further in their criticism and posed the question of principle whether LWF can have any church mandate at all. Against this background, they claimed that the entire future of LWF was called into question and that they themselves must consider whether the Church of Denmark could continue as a member of the Federation. The Danes however, were rather isolated in such a radical point of view, and there is no doubt that there is a connection here with the somewhat special Danish ecclesiology, where there is no place for central bodies with authority.³³

There is no space here to present in detail the historical process which led to the resolution in Curitiba, nor shall I discuss the material from biblical theology and church history which is at the basis of the *communio* ecclesiology, nor the ecumenical context to which this concept is linked.³⁴ I shall rather concentrate on the LWF's self-understanding, and attempt to portray the development which led to the resolution at Curitiba.

It was claimed in the debates before and during the Assembly, that the transition from «free association» to «communion of churches» involves a clear break with the earlier mandate. Does this mean that we are faced with a wholly different LWF from that which was set up in 1947? What motivated the proposal to change the constitution: was it the wish to legitimize a centralized apparatus of power, and does this mean a break with Lutheran ecclesiology? Or is it the case quite to the contrary, that the concept of *communio* promotes an ecclesiological reflection that takes seriously both the confessional inheritance, and the challenges facing the Lutheran world family in our age? In other words, is it the case that a new context demands new thinking in ecclesiology, and thereby also a revision of the terminology which is used to express the self-understanding?

33 We see what strong reactions this provoked before the meeting at Curitiba in a letter which the Council for Interchurch Affairs of the Danish national church sent to the LWF's executive committee on 4 January 1989. This gave commentaries on the proposal about the structure which had been sent out at that time for consultation in the member churches. In this letter it is stated: «We are directly opposed to the 11th paragraph saying that «The LWF is no longer a «free association» which delegates certain activities to a joint agency.» This is exactly what the LWF is for us: a free association of *churches* (which word is omitted in paragraph 11). If the autonomy and independence of the member churches is violated through a superficial use of the «theology of communion» giving the theological background of the new structure, the future membership of the Church of Denmark would be severely questioned by us... As strongly as we can, we appeal to the executive committee to state clearly that the LWF is a free association, exercising no authority over the member churches. In our view, the whole future of the LWF is at stake.»

34 An introduction to the concept of *communio* is found in LWF (1990): *Communio/Koinonia. A New Testament-Early Christian Concept and its Contemporary Appropriation and Significance. A Study by the Institute for Ecumenical Research*, Strasbourg.

In addressing these issues I have concentrated on critical periods in the LWF's history, where many questions were raised with the consequence that the Federation's self-understanding became a problem anew.

My chief thesis is that the development of the LWF's self-understanding from «free association» to a «communion of churches» is connected to a significant change of the context within which ecclesiological reflection is occurring. First, there is a geographic widening from a North-Atlantic to a worldwide ecclesiastical reality. Secondly, there is a shift from a narrow perspective of ecclesiastical law to a holistic perspective where the celebration of worship, witness and service have become elements that share in determining the self-understanding. Thirdly, there is the change from an internal ecclesiastical sphere to a wider nexus of social, cultural, economic and political conditions as the context for understanding the church's nature and mission.

Thus the ecclesiological reflection in the LWF has not taken place in a vacuum, but is determined by praxis and by new challenges which demand new reflection. This context has in part, a non-theological character and is connected with trends in the development of society where internationalization is a keyword. But one must also take into account important changes in the ecclesiastical sphere: ecumenical work, mission and international diakonia have furnished new experiences, and above all a stronger experience of belonging together in a worldwide context, with the sharing this brings in each other's faith and life. Within the framework of the LWF, this has made it not only possible but necessary to rethink the essence and the mandate of the Federation, together with the ecclesiological implications which it has received.

I am not the first to point out this understanding of the close connection between praxis and reflection. In a lecture presented to the Executive Committee of LWF in Turku, Finland in 1981 — at a time when a new discussion about the LWF's self-understanding was just beginning — Günther Gassmann, director of Faith and Order of the WCC, emphasized that «the reflection on the self-understanding of the LWF arises from a certain context and at the same time it is oriented towards it. It is not a question of perpetual institutional self-reflection, nor an introverted defensive self-justification. A fellowship such as the LWF must know from what it draws its sustenance, what holds it together and supports it, and what it is called by God to do...» It is the same understanding of the connection between context and reflection that leads Gassmann to conclude that «the Lutheran communion, in ecclesiological terms, has moved far beyond what the LWF in its constitution says about itself'.»³⁵

This said, we must add that it is precisely the question about self-understanding that has been a constant dilemma for the LWF throughout its whole history. From the time it began in 1947, the dilemma has been linked to a discussion about whether the Federation is to understand itself as an association of a secular

35 LWF Executive Committee meeting minutes, Turku, 1981, exhibit 10.2, §§34 and 36.

character, or whether it also has ecclesial characteristics. During the first decades the context was such that this dilemma was discussed primarily on the basis of reflections arising from church law. Through the new contextual orientation of the 1970s, and thanks to the vocabulary which the *communio* ecclesiology developed in the course of the 1980s, a new position became possible in relation to this dilemma, which ended at the Assembly in Curitiba with a change of the constitution such that the LWF now understands itself as «a communion of churches».

The original context

The original context for the ecclesiological self-understanding in LWF is linked, naturally enough to the first Assembly at Lund, Sweden in 1947. In the constitution adopted there we read: «The LWF shall be a free association of Lutheran churches. It shall have no power to legislate for the churches belonging to it or to interfere with their complete autonomy, but shall act as their agent in such matters as they assign to it.» The very tone in these formulations discloses that the mandate is clearly demarcated. The LWF is not to be understood as a «super-church» with formal authority over its member churches.

There were several reasons for this reservation. Despite the earlier Lutheran World Convention (LWC) and other actions common to Lutherans from the period before the Second World War, the leaders tended to have few experiences of international church cooperation. A common understanding of belonging to a Lutheran fellowship that went beyond national and cultural boundaries was something that existed only to a small degree. It is true that the Luther renaissance had given important stimuli, along with the jubilees in 1917 and 1939, but it was only in the USA that the Lutheran churches, despite their different ethnical and cultural roots, had developed a common self-understanding as a Lutheran church fellowship, with the consequent needs for common church structures both locally and regionally and also, gradually, globally. In the German area, the skepticism about a «superchurch» was still linked to negative experiences from the last century, when the Prussian royal power attempted to force the churches to accept an overarching ecclesiastical structure. In the Scandinavian countries, the church had had a national and territorial order from the Reformation onwards, and there was little understanding for a supranational Lutheran organization with its own ecclesiastical mandate. To the extent that there was any commitment to church contacts beyond the boundaries of one's own country, it was more natural to link one's expectations to the World Council of Churches, which was also established at this time.³⁶

Eugene L. Brand, former director of the Department of Studies of the LWF, claims that the restrictive formulation in the constitution is a concession made by the LWC «from a time when the LWC executive committee had been obliged to use it to allay the anxieties of those who feared any sort of established worldwide Lutheran organization» (Brand 1988:41). But it was also pointed out within the

LWC, that the Lutheran churches formed a worldwide church fellowship, as the Danish theologian Alfred Th. Jørgensen expressed at the LWC's second great meeting in Copenhagen in 1929: «The Lutheran church in 1929 is... not a collection of stones that we now want to try to bring together to form a mosaic. The modern Lutheran church — to the extent that its members are true to their confession — is a *unity*. It is *one* church» (Brunner 1960/61:279–280).³⁷ This implies a fundamental principle which has been a pillar in the development of the *communio* ecclesiology, a principle that Brand describes as the *cantus firmus* in the discussion, viz. that confessional communion *is* ecclesial communion (Brand 1988:36).

Nevertheless, as we have seen, it was reservation that marked the constitution adopted at the meeting in Lund. The external political and social situation in Europe after the war called more for practical measures of help in the short term than for reflections on ecclesiological principles. Seen in this way, the formulation can also be determined by a pragmatism that was more concerned to establish a common Lutheran organization than to discuss all the theological questions which this implied. This provisional character was also linked to the church-political strategy which was chosen in the endeavour to give the LWF such a broad platform that even the conservative North American Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS) could seek membership. In the first twenty years of the LWF's history, this unclarified relationship to the LCMS came to determine much of the discussion about self-understanding, and the tendency was to avoid statements and positions that could have the effect of giving offence to the LCMS. This slowed down the ecclesiological reflection. Only when it was accepted at the beginning of the 1970s that this membership was not a relevant question, did it become possible for the questions to be raised anew with full weight.

36 It is only in 1923, when the LWC met for the first time at Eisenach, that one can speak of a worldwide meeting of Lutherans. Eugene Brand notes that if the establishment of the AELK (Allgemeine Evangelisch-Lutherische Konferenz) in 1868 «marks the initial step in developing a self-conscious world Lutheranism, then Eisenach marks its emergence» (Brand 1988:34). There have always been voices within the LWF critical of a Lutheran confessionalism. Ulrich Duchrow claims that the neo-confessionalism that emerged in the nineteenth century is a deviation from the Reformation position in that particular confessions of faith are made constitutive of the church and of its unity. He concludes therefore that the LWF's ecclesiological dilemma can be resolved only within the framework of *una sancta* (Duchrow 1980:224).

37 Bengt Wadensjö, who deals with the development until 1929 in his dissertation *Towards a World Lutheran Communion* (Uppsala, 1970), likewise demonstrates that a clear understanding of the Lutheran churches as *communio* already existed at that time; G. Staalsett has referred to this many times, when it has been claimed that *communio* ecclesiology is something new and alien in a Lutheran context.

A new ecumenical context

The discussion was started by the German theologian Peter Brunner with an early 1960s article in the *Lutherische Rundschau* in which he demonstrated the self-contradiction in the LWF's constitution, which speaks of the doctrinal basis of the Federation in ecclesial categories (art. II), while at the same time laying down that the LWF is a «free association of churches.» For Brunner, this is not only a problem of principles of church law, but is also linked to the LWF's praxis, because the Federation, «thanks to its doctrinal basis which binds it, acts *in concrete* again and again as a church, and makes decisions through its action which lie within the horizon of ecclesial doctrinal decisions» (Brunner 1960/61:294). Brunner does not describe more precisely what kind of praxis and decisions he is speaking of here. In general terms, he points out that the world has become one, and that the church can no longer limit its self-understanding to national or regional boundaries. As an example of such a challenge, Brunner points to the pope's summoning of the Second Vatican Council. How could the worldwide Lutheran church answer if it were to receive an invitation to an ecumenical council? On the basis of its constitution, the LWF would no more be able to represent the Lutheran church than would one individual church. But Brunner also indicates internal challenges. When tasks in mission and ecumenism are tackled in fellowship, the LWF's praxis will necessarily have to become more and more the praxis of a church. In other words, it is the process itself that creates the ecclesial character, or, as Brunner concludes:

«The World Federation is not an *esse*, but a *fieri*. It is on the way to realizing more and more the church fellowship that exists between the individual Lutheran churches and to become an organ of the one worldwide Lutheran church» (Brunner 1960/61:299).

Even if Peter Brunner was successful in initiating a debate, the LWF's Assembly in Helsinki, Finland in 1963 showed that there was as yet little openness in the member churches for this new context. The debate continued to be linked to church law premises, and ended with the following addition to the article in the constitution of which we have been speaking: «... it (LWF) shall not exercise churchly functions on its own authority nor shall it have power to legislate for the churches belonging to it or to limit the autonomy of any member church.»

The resolution shows that fear of a Lutheran «superchurch» continued in force. Nevertheless, the LWF was given the green light to become involved in bilateral doctrinal discussions with other churches, above all with the Roman Catholic Church, a praxis which ultimately had to break through the restrictive mandate which the addition to the constitution had laid down for the Federation, since it was inevitable that these discussions gave the LWF an authority that could not be linked in every instance to resolutions adopted in the member churches. It was precisely because of the contents of these discussions that the LWF also took on ecclesiological weight, just as Brunner had prophesied. There is therefore no reason to be surprised that it was the theologians who were centrally involved in

these discussions who criticized most strongly the untenability in the LWF's constitutional self-understanding. One of them, Harding Meyer, Research Professor at the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg, claimed before the LWF's Executive Committee in Joinville, Brazil in 1979, that the development involving the bilateral doctrinal discussions in recent years had led to the point where the LWF now appeared on the scene as «a real *communion* of churches, which share pulpit and altar fellowship; without wanting to be a 'church' in the full sense, it possesses a high degree of 'ecclesial density'». ³⁸

The bilateral doctrinal discussions were one of the contextual processes that finally compelled a new discussion of the LWF's self-understanding. But there was also another such contextual process. This became more and more noticeable after the Assembly at Evian, France in 1970, and is characterized by a new understanding of the connection between church and society. This meant inter alia that the entire activity carried out by the LWF in the diaconal, social and political sphere took on ecclesiological implications, again as Brunner had predicted in his article of 1961. Now the department of studies in the LWF carried out a controversial ecclesiological study called «Die Identität der Kirche und ihr Dienst am ganzen Menschen» («The identity of the church and its service to the whole human being»), in which a contextual method was applied that ensured that the questions about identity and mandate were elevated above the traditional confessionalist positions.» ³⁹ The dispute about this study programme did not, however, prevent it from preparing the way for a whole new awareness of the significance of belonging to a global church fellowship. This emerged with particular clarity at the Assembly in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania in 1977, when this understanding became decisive in the discussion about the relationship to the white member churches in South Africa and Namibia, and it was established that confessionality is more than the adherence to doctrinal statements, but is also a question of the celebration of worship and of praxis related to society. This was the background for the Assembly's resolution to make the relationship to apartheid a *status confessionis*. In this way, the two contextual processes were brought together, and by means of the Assembly's resolution, a decision about a socio-political question was taken on behalf of the member churches and with reference to the doctrinal basis of the

38 Harding Meyer, «A Theological Commentary on the Lutheran World Federation», minutes LWF Executive Committee, Joinville, 1979, exhibit 10.2.1.1., §35.

39 The contextual methodology which was launched at this time both in the LWF and in the WCC brought the Norwegian Theological Committee to adopt the document *Økumenisk metodologi* in 1974, expressing «deep unease about the development», with the conclusion that the «doctrinal dialogue must be given objective priority»; text in TTK 2/1975, pp.103–120. In this document, and even more in Bernt T. Oftestad's article «Den kontekstuelle metode og kirkens katolisitet» (Oftestad 1974), the view is presented that doctrinal consensus is a presupposition for ecclesial unity, in other words, the confessionalism which the Missouri Synod has upheld in the discussion with the LWF. The LWF's ecclesiological study is dealt with thoroughly by Günter Krusche (Krusche 1986).

Federation. Thus the Assembly acted «in a magisterial fashion,» as Dan Martensen, then responsible for ecumenical relations in the LWF Studies Department, observes (Martensen 1980:56).

But had the LWF itself and its Assembly the authority to define something as a *status confessionis*? When the Executive Committee wished to clarify this question more precisely, it chose to consult the member churches through a questionnaire, so that it could find out how they evaluated the situation and the LWF's ecumenical role.⁴⁰ The actual formulation of the questions was still primarily determined by North Atlantic problems and thus by the first context, that of the bilateral discussions. But it was also possible to discern a certain link to the other process, when it was asked whether a widening of the LWF's confessionality was desirable.

The Budapest meeting and the breakthrough of the *communio* ecclesiology

Among the documents which were sent in advance to the delegates to the LWF's Seventh Assembly in Budapest, Hungary in 1984 was a report from the study department with an analysis of the answers that had been received from the member churches (LWF 1984). While it was noted that there were considerable reservations against giving the LWF ecclesial status as a federation, it emerged clearly that the context now was completely different from that in which the LWF's self-understanding had last been discussed; and this was linked especially to the recognition of solidarity within the fellowship of Lutheran churches. «The Lutheran communion, which does find its full and only expression in the LWF, nevertheless becomes visible in the common life and calling of the member churches of the LWF and is served by its organizational structures and resources. Thereby, the LWF participates in the ecclesial nature of the Lutheran communion, but does not have such a nature in itself. The LWF becomes therefore, the expression and instrument of the Lutheran communion. It serves as such an instrument both for the upbuilding of the communion of the Lutheran churches and for the realization of their commitment within the wider ecumenical context» (LWF 1984:§46).

40 The following four questions were put to the member churches: «(1) Does your church welcome the possibility that the ecclesial nature of the LWF is becoming more pronounced? (2) Does your church see any difficulties with the apparent broadening of the understanding of the confessionality in the LWF? (3) Would your church like to see world Lutheranism as a confessional community become more visible and influential in the life of the World Council of Churches? (4) In concrete terms, what would your church like to see the LWF do or do differently to help facilitate ecumenical work in your locality or region?» Quoted in Brand 1988:60–61.

Against the background of this document, the Assembly in Budapest adopted a «Statement on the Self-Understanding and Task of the LWF» (LWF 1985:176–177). As in the report from the study department, the *communio* ecclesiology is given a key role here in the definition of the LWF's self-understanding and mandate. The starting-point is that the worldwide fellowship of Lutheran churches as a confessional fellowship, forms a communion. Thus the *cantus firmus* that fellowship in communion *is* church fellowship is maintained, and since this is a church fellowship, it has an «ecclesial nature.» The LWF is not identical with this communion, but is its «expression and instrument.» This implies that the Federation has not merely an instrumental character, it is also the expression of the qualities that characterize the fellowship of Lutheran churches and are made visible through «pulpit and altar fellowship, in common witness and service, in the joint fulfillment of the missionary task, and in openness to ecumenical cooperation, dialogue, and community».

The reference to the worldwide Lutheran fellowship means that the LWF is understood as more than the sum of the member churches, and this gives the Federation an authority of its own as a fellowship that imposes obligations. Precisely this question remained unclarified at Budapest, and it is not difficult to sense the ambiguity which finds expression in the «Statement»: «The kind of authority the LWF possesses is a delegated authority entrusted to the Federation by its member churches for particular purposes. It is also a moral authority, which is lodged in the inner persuasive power of decisions that are submitted to the member churches for their reception». On the one hand, this contains a reservation through the reference to the member churches in order to guard against a top-down structure where the degree of authority increases in proportion to the level on the pyramid of power. But on the other hand, the statement that the authority is delegated can also be interpreted as an acknowledgment that it is participatory, within the framework of an organic fellowship. In other words, what we have here is not merely a one-sided movement upwards from the base. It is only in this way that it is possible to speak of a fellowship that imposes obligations, and when the «Statement» speaks of the LWF's moral authority, this too must be seen as a continuation of, and in connection with, the authority which one or more member churches exercise through the LWF in the name of the fellowship. This does not mean that the LWF is reduced to the role of mouthpiece for its member churches. In the very exercise of its office as expression and instrument for the fellowship lies an implied authority, but this authority must stand in a dialectical relation to the individual churches through a process of reception, so that it does not become authoritarian.

This authority is not based on what Harding Meyer described in 1979 as the LWF's «ecclesial density.» Not only is this expression imprecise, it can also be interpreted to mean that this «ecclesial density» exists independently of, or without, the intimate dialectic with the church in its local context. And the *communio* ecclesiology is much better suited to bring out the idea on the other side, that the LWF is more than the sum of the member churches.

It must also be mentioned that the meeting in Budapest also adopted another important document, namely the «Statement on The Unity We Seek».⁴¹ Here it is made clear that the Lutheran communion understands itself within the context of «the one universal church». In other words, the development of a *communio* ecclesiology is not meant to serve a Lutheran confessionalism, but is to contribute, on the contrary, to making it clear that the Lutheran communion is an «expression of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church» and consequently «committed to work for the manifestation of the unity of the church given in Jesus Christ».

Thus, the Budapest meeting was a turning-point as far as the self-understanding of the LWF was concerned, and the *communio* ecclesiology was a breakthrough because it enabled the LWF to adapt ecclesiologically to the new context in which it found itself. As a natural consequence, article III.l in the constitution was expanded as follows: «the member churches... understand themselves to be in pulpit and altar fellowship with each other.» The formulation expresses what had been the *cantus firmus* the whole time, viz. that recognition had been finally given to a fellowship which existed de facto. Thus, it is not the case that the member churches resolved to enter such a fellowship with one another. Since there is no lack of agreement about preaching and the doctrine of the sacraments, as Confessio Augustana (CA) 7 defines the basis for church fellowship, this fellowship already exists, and it is only up to the individual churches to recognize it.

The further development of the *communio* ecclesiology

After the Budapest meeting it was necessary to give more content to the *communio* ecclesiology. It was above all the new General Secretary, Gunnar Staalsett, who undertook this task.

As early as the first meeting of the Executive Committee after his election, in Munich, Germany in 1986, Staalsett expressed «a strong personal commitment to an understanding of the LWF as the communion of Lutheran churches, dedicated to a strong ecumenical partnership and to mission understood as the proclamation of the gospel and service for justice, peace and human rights».⁴² Staalsett indicated three chief points under the heading «a theology of communion.» First, that communion is «participation in the Holy Spirit», something that reveals its eschatological reality, secondly, that «communion is bodied forth in the visible fellowship which is the church», and thirdly, «as an ontic reality in this world, the Christian communion has an organizational or institutional aspect.» With this starting point, Staalsett maintained that it was necessary to come one step further

41 LWF 1985. The basis for this document is found in the *Consultation on the Relations between the WCC and the LWF*, Bossey, 11–14 May 1981.

42 LWF Executive Committee meeting, Munich, 1986, exhibit 7, §1.

in the question about the mandate and authority in the LWF. «We must raise the question of doctrinal and disciplinary standards. The LWF has not been able to avoid acting like a world church on occasion. Sooner or later we must decide whether we should regularize what we have done ad hoc. We need to speak openly about the authority proper to a world communion and how it should be exercised in a manner consistent with our evangelical orientation».⁴³

Staalsett's statements aroused strong reactions, although they stood in a clear continuity with the resolutions agreed to in Budapest. There are several possible reasons for this. In the German area, there was already considerable irritation over the LWF's investigation of their links to the German churches in Southern Africa, and bitterness was also caused by the fact that Staalsett was not willing to give a particular national committee the leading role which it had earlier had in the LWF. But others also reacted against Staalsett's open assertions that there was a nexus between ecclesiology and organization, and the opposition became even more intense as this idea gradually took the form of proposals for a new LWF structure. This opposition was based both on a general reservation vis-a-vis the *communio* ecclesiology, and on a reservation about what was understood as an attempt to use a particular ecclesiological model to build up a centralized apparatus of power in Geneva.

There is no space to go into the whole of this conflict here. But it must be noted that it was primarily representatives of the member churches in Northern Europe who were critical of General Secretary Staalsett's position, and the argumentation seems to have been determined as much by their own church-political context as by the concrete challenges which faced the LWF after the resolutions in Budapest. The attitude was much more positive among representatives from the member churches in the South, both with regard to the *communio* ecclesiology and with regard to the proposals about the changes to the constitution and the structures which were launched by Staalsett. At the Assembly in Curitiba for example, this was expressed by the South African church leader Manas Buthelezi, who wished that the LWF could change its name to the Lutheran World Communion because «communion» is a biblical concept, whereas «federation» is a legal, constitutional concept. Buthelezi maintained particularly that communion makes visible the organic context in which the Lutheran fellowship stands, while at the same time opening the way to a recognition of a common standpoint under the cross: «the viability of any communion depends on the willingness of the members to adopt the cross as a life-style».⁴⁴

There is a clear link between these points of view and the substance of General Secretary Staalsett's presentation of the LWF as «a communion of churches.» At the, Executive Committee meeting in Munich in 1986 and in Viborg, Denmark the following year, Staalsett urged that there is a nexus between spirituality,

43 Ibid. §35.

44 M. Buthelezi, «Life in Communion», LWF Assembly, Curitiba, 1990, exhibit 5.1.1., cf. esp. §§15 and 66.

witness and service in the realization of the fellowship. At the meeting in Munich, he referred to Luther's statement that the one who receives Christ receives all the members of his body, thereby paving the way for an understanding of the LWF, as a fellowship of service where «Christian communion has to be incarnated in the human community».⁴⁵ At Viborg, he maintained that «spirituality is at the heart of communion and communion is the visible expression of shared spirituality».⁴⁶ By speaking in this way of communion as a goal and as a life-style, Staalsett located the ecclesiological reflection within the total context of the challenges facing LWF, in a way that allowed praxis to generate theological insight.⁴⁷

The discussion preceding the Assembly in Curitiba brought Staalsett to define his own position more precisely. At the last Executive Committee meeting before the Assembly in Geneva in 1989, he confirmed that *communio* ecclesiology is not to be understood as if it could dictate a particular structure; on the contrary, it serves to assess critically every structure. If the expression «free association» no longer serves, this is because it is incapable of maintaining the understanding of «interdependence among autonomous churches.» But Staalsett also warned those who wish to use «the vocabulary of *communio*» without a willingness to «translate it into structures, programmes and institutions which reflect a readiness to regard all the member churches of the Federation as equal. Communion must be seen in relation to established realities of dependence and domination by churches of history, wealth, size, culture and power.»⁴⁸ Without this concretization in the everyday life of the global church, *communio* ecclesiology can quickly develop triumphalistic traits.

As I noted at the beginning, the proposal to change the constitution and to give a new structure was adopted with the necessary two-thirds majority at the Assembly in Curitiba. The new article III,1 of the constitution states: «The LWF is a communion of churches which confess the triune God, agree in the proclamation of the word of God and are united in pulpit and altar fellowship.» The message from the Assembly contains five qualifications of this communion in which the Lutheran churches now understand themselves to be: first, it is «a spiritual communion bound together in the Holy Spirit...»; second, «a sacramental communion, called by the gospel, united in one baptism and gathered around the same table»; third, «a confessional communion»; fourth, «a witnessing communion»; and fifth, «a serving communion.» This synthesis shows that the contextual processes have now been brought together, and an ecclesiological terminology

45 LWF Executive Committee meeting, Viborg, 1987, exhibit 7, Munich, 1986, exhibit 7, §§28 and 46.

46 LWF Executive Committee meeting, Viborg, 1987, exhibit 7, §14.

47 This view is expressed in Staalsett's assessment of the Budapest meeting, «a history which reveals how praxis can bring alive theological conviction», LWF Assembly, Curitiba, 1990, exhibit 3.2, §60.

48 LWF Executive Committee meeting, Geneva, 1989, exhibit 7, §§56 and 62.

shaped which maintains both the confessional identity and the challenges facing the Lutheran fellowship at the beginning of the 1990s.

A weakness of Lutheran ecclesiology has been that all attention has been focused on the statement in CA 7 about the constitutive significance which the administration of the means of grace has for the church. This tends to a static ecclesiology, without an appreciation of the church both as a continuity and as marked by a shifting context. In our century, many important contributions have been made to the renewal of ecclesiological reflection. One example is the Second Vatican Council's understanding of the church as the people of God. In the Lutheran context, the *communio* ecclesiology is an equally creative contribution. This does not mean that it is a magic formula that would exclude the possibility of «going off the rails» ecclesologically. A new terminology is no automatic guarantee of such a development, nor is it the case that the *communio* ecclesiology alone can give a satisfactory answer to all the questions about the church's identity and task. In many fields, we still need to make use of other ecclesiological terms. But as the *communio* ecclesiology has been developed within the LWF it contains, in my view, the potential for serious reflection on what it means to be the church in our age.

This means that the resolution in Curitiba must not be understood as the final point in this process. When the new Executive Committee met at Geneva in June 1990, the newly-elected president, Gottfried Brakemeier, emphasized that «communion is something we need to learn». He referred here not only to the bitter debate at Curitiba, which could call into question the credibility of the *communio* concept, but also to the totality of the ethical implications of being a church fellowship in a world full of conflict. For Brakemeier, diakonia understood here as «the attempt, through settling of conflicts and a show of solidarity, to bring about those changes that make the praise of God easier for human beings,» remains a primary task on the road ahead (Brakemeier 1990:14).

The *communio* ecclesiology enables a continued elaboration of this diaconal perspective, in the interface between ecclesiology and context. Indeed it is precisely this perspective that has marked the Lutheran fellowship from the meeting in Eisenach in 1923 onwards, when diakonia (or *Bruderliebe*, as it was then called in the German text) was the theme of one of the first common resolutions. The same perspective emerged in the keynote address by the North American church historian E. Clifford Nelson at the Assembly in Helsinki in 1963. On the question of how a worldwide church can be organized, he concluded that it must find a form that corresponds to its essential being, which is «a servant's being» (Nelson 1964:416).

Concluding, it can be stated that diakonia always has been in integral part of the LWF, both of its vision and its performance as action by churches together. Its first Assembly in 1947 in Lund, Sweden, was marked by the challenge of millions of refugees in Europe and resulted in the establishment of a Department for World Service, which continues today as an important expression of the shared commitment to international diakonia. Equally, it is clear that this history pro-

foundly has shaped the understanding of being in communion when reflecting theologically on the significance of this term, and even more, in the unfolding of mutual relationships – as partners in God’s mission for the healing of the world.

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Diakonia, as the churches' social action and healing ministry, has received increased attention over the last few decades. The ecumenical reflection on diakonia generally focuses on:

- Ecclesial identity, emphasizing the mutual relation between what the church is and what the church does
- Holistic nature and interdisciplinary approach
- Prophetic mandate, publicly defending the cause of the poor and suffering in the struggle for justice.

Liberating Diakonia presents and reflects critically on these issues. The reader can follow these issues through twelve essays under three main headings:

1. The Theology of Diakonia
2. The Diaconal Ministry
3. Diakonia as Integral Part of Mission

Through the book, special attention is given to questions of hermeneutics and the methodological approach. How is it possible to establish a scientific discourse on diakonia, as disciplined reflection on praxis?



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